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May 30, 1882.

Vol. X.

Single
Number.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

No. 253.

Sierra Sam's Pard; or, The Angel of Big Vista.

BY EDWARD L. WHEELER,

AUTHOR OF "DEADWOOD DICK" NOVELS, "ROSEBUD ROB" NOVELS, "GILT-EDGED DICK," "BONANZA BILL," ETC., ETC.



"AN' YOUR'E THE CUSSDEST LYIN' FAME-STEALER I EVER HEARN TELL ON!" NO. 2 FIRED BACK. "I AM SNODGRASS THE SNORTER!"

Sierra Sam's Pard;

OR,

THE ANGEL OF BIG VISTA.

A Mountain Tale.

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BUD ROB" NOVELS, ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

SIERRA SAM'S CADAVER.

THE Flumeville stage rolled down into Flumeville, at precisely six o'clock, when the sun was just sinking behind the pine-clad peaks of the Divide, and the miners were quitting their day's work and coming "into town" from the scene of their labors.

As the stage always brought in the mail for those of the rugged citizens who were fortunate enough ever to receive any, and as the ponderous vehicle always stopped at the tavern, to unload its mail and passengers, six o'clock always saw the representative citizens of the little city congregated in and about the tavern, in full working dress, and as dirty as the nature of their work could make them.

Flumeville was what an observer would have called a *well-manned* city, for the inhabitants were all men.

Only one woman had ever dawned upon the rugged horizon, below which the little mining camp nestled; only one case of the softening influence of the opposite sex was known among the knights who wielded the pick and shovel in Flumeville gulch.

If any of the fortune-hunters had wives and children in other parts of the country, they were careful to keep the secret locked within their own bosoms; consequently, Flumeville was, to all intents, a bachelor town, with one exception.

The usual crowd was drawn up in line before the tavern, when Long Lige, the Jehu of the stage, "yanked" his four-in-hand back upon their haunches, and brought the vehicle to a halt.

It was a rare thing for the stage to drop a passenger at Flumeville, but to-night a man clambered out of the conveyance, valise in hand, and struck a bee-line for the barroom, where he proceeded to wash down the dust of travel with a glass of "bug-juice," in the most approved style.

After he had "inclosed the beverage," he smacked his lips with a grateful air, as if he had been partaking of nectar instead of regular old "forty-rod stuff," and looked around him to take note of his surroundings.

Every inch a six-footer, as he stood in his boots, he was as lean as a bean-pole—no apparent superfluous flesh existing anywhere upon his skeleton-like frame, to which his poorly-tailored garments hung with great looseness.

His face was equally thin and pinched, and wore a ghostly and cadaverous expression, while his eyes, black and sharp as a hawk's were sunken beneath an overhanging pair of shaggy eyebrows. His hair was tow-colored, while of beard he wore none.

Commonly dressed was this new-comer, and altogether a man calculated to attract attention in any crowd, on account of his extreme leanness.

After looking over the rough audience with an inquiring gaze, the skinny gentleman turned to the bar maid, "Jim Jackson's gal, Mag," as the proprietor's daughter was called—a smart, quick-witted, and by no means homely, true-western miss, of some sixteen summers, who ran the tavern, while her father labored at the "cradle."

"Ahem! Nice day!" the thin man observed, by way of opening a conversation.

"Lovely!" Miss Maggie responded, busying herself at polishing off the counter. "Jest drap down on the hearse?"

"I did that, expecting to find more of a town. I am from Big Vista—heard of it I dare say. My name is Junius Brutus Dunk."

"Indeed! What a delightful name!" Maggie said, with mock soberness. "I s'pect you're one o' the big guns up at Big Vista, Mr. Dunk—eh?"

The lank man looked displeased.

"My name is not Donkey, miss—but Junius Brutus Dunk. I flatter myself that I am one of the representative gentlemen of Big Vista."

"I judged likely," Maggie allowed, turning half around to suppress a giggle. "Let me see

—haven't I heard something about there having been a famine up there, lately?"

Dunk colored, for he "tumbled" to her hint quite readily; he was at first inclined to frown, but finally brought to the surface of his cadaverous face rather a ghastly smile.

"Well, not particularly; although I might personally illustrate the contrary," he replied. "By the way, you seem to be a pretty pert young miss—maybe you can answer me a few questions?"

"Well, that depends. Can tell better arter you ax 'em."

"That's sure as you live! Well, to begin with, do you know a man here in Flumeville by the name of Sierra Sam?"

Maggie looked surprised.

"Waal, I should say so," she confessed, with a nod. "Guess thar's few as don't know Sammy."

"Ah! then I am in luck by coming here. What sort of a character is this Sierra Sam?"

"He? Waal, I guess you'll find he's about the strangest character you ever tackled, ef you go a-nosin' inter his business. When he ain't disturbed he's jest as playful and kittenish as ye please; when he's riled, he's *bad*."

"So I hear. Well, I must interview him, at all events. If I get demolished, please have my remains expressed back to Big Vista."

"Waal, jest let me remind you that thar won't be no need of that," Maggie suggested. "Sammy's a pulverizer, Sammy is, and if he should ever shake up your bones, there'd be nothing left for transportation."

Dunk was probably not of that opinion, however, for he wandered leisurely about the barroom, awaiting the appearance of Mr. Sierra Sam.

In the course of an hour, that individual put in an appearance, armed with a shovel and pan, and somewhat more mud-splashed and grimy than was usual with the dashing Mountain Ferret.

His face and figure however, had lost none of the old-time grace of outline, and his eyes glowed with the same good-nature as of old. His long hair swept down to his shoulders, from beneath his jaunty sombrero; his mustache and imperial were as neatly pointed as ever.

After depositing his tools in one corner, he turned and gazed at the occupants of the room, with a nod, his eyes finally resting upon Dunk.

Something like a waggish glitter shot into his eyes as he scanned the attenuated man, but he turned his glance away so as not to betray it.

Dunk, seeming to realize that Sam was the man he was looking for, soon came forward and tapped the Californian on the shoulder.

"Excuse me, my friend," he said; "but have I the honor of addressing Sierra Sam?"

"I allow you have, if so be there is any honor thereto attached!" Sam responded dryly. "I am generally known by the name of Sierra Sam."

"And I am Junius Brutus Dunk, Esq., of Big Vista, at your service. I came here on purpose to hunt you up and have a talk with you on a matter of importance. So if you will grant me a private interview, we will at once get down to business."

"Well, if your business is as important as you intimate, perhaps we had better adjourn to my palace," Sam suggested. "Come this way."

He led the way from the tavern to a small log-cabin near at hand, where he "lived" when he was at home, as he explained while en route.

It was furnished after the primitive frontier style, and yet was a neat, and, withal, a comfortable abode.

Sierra Sam seated himself upon a stool at one end of a long, rough table, and motioned the man from Big Vista to take a like position at the opposite end.

"Well, Mr. Dunk, I am attention. Proceed to unload as rapidly as you like."

"That I will, sir," the other replied. "In the first place, I wish to announce that I came here for your individual interest, providing we can come to terms—that is to say. I have an important revelation to make to you, which is vastly to your pecuniary interest."

"Ah! well, that is good news. Am I to fall heir to half-a-dozen gold mines, or a million or two in Government bonds?"

"Well, that depends. I am here, the possessor of valuable data that to you means much. I am the kind of a man who lives by his wits, in preference to manual."

"So I should estimate," Sam smiled, stroking his chin. "Judging by your personal appearance, however, the effects of subsisting on the

strength of your wits has rather rubbed against your constitution, not?"

Dunk frowned.

"You are inclined to poke fun at me!" he demurred, evidently displeased. "When you come to know me better, you won't do this. Why, my dear man, you have no idea what a godsend I can be to you, if we come to terms."

"Ah! indeed! Supposing we don't come to terms—what then? Oh, well, then that alters the case!" Sam both queried and answered with a light laugh.

Junius Brutus stared hard.

"Exactly—that alters the case," he repeated. "I can lay you gently in the lap of luxury, or do you incalculable injury at will. My mission here is speculative. I come to make terms with you, if you choose; if you don't, why I have other ends to further."

"Consequently I am to know you as a superannuated shyster, eh?" Sam assumed, dryly. "My friend, I don't think I care to entertain any dealings with you."

"But, you don't understand—you don't know what you are talking about, my dear sir! You don't seem to realize that I am the man through whose instrumentality you can win or lose a fortune."

"You think thusly?"

"I know it! All you've got to do is to come to reasonable terms, and I will put you on the track of a priceless fortune, which otherwise you must remain in ignorance of all your life."

"Well, that's a pretty broad mouthful for you to ask me to swallow," Sam declared, calmly. "You may be quite sharp, as far as sharpness goes, but at the same time I flatter myself it takes an uncommon human to ring in a deal on Sam'l."

"This is no deal."

"Well, maybe not. According to your outline, if I pay you a sum of money, you will in return give me a fortune. Now, how much money do you want in case I should feel disposed to dicker with you?"

"Ah, you talk business now," the man from Big Vista exclaimed, rubbing his hands together patronizingly. "It shows what good sense you possess. I have always heard tell of you as a brave, noble sort of fellow, and I cannot find it in my heart to be hard on you. So if you will give me a thousand, why I'll give you the secret, and we'll call it square. You cannot make an independent fortune easier."

"Not to let you tell it, very likely. But you see I know better. Supposing I were to turn around and tell you what you wish to sell to me?"

"That you *can't* do," Dunk growled.

"But I can, though! You wish to inform me ten hundred dollars' worth that I have a rich old maiden aunt residing in Big Vista."

Junius Brutus looked astounded.

"This old maiden aunt, Tabitha Green by name, happens to be nearing the portals eternal possessed of two valuable gold mines. Having read, no doubt, of the promised difficulty rich people shall encounter in getting a passport into the realms of bliss, she wishes to give away her riches to one of her two nephews, of whom I chance to be one. Is this not so?"

"Well?"

"Having known Tabitha's desire to see her long-haired relative, with a view to heaping upon him some of her superfluous cash, you, hired by nephew Number Two, set out in search of nephew Number One, for the purpose of terminating his existence in case you cannot make better terms with him."

The Californian was now eyeing the man from Big Vista sternly; the latter sat rigidly on his stool, his face even whiter than usual.

"I knew you were coming—I am glad to meet you," Sam pursued, with triumph. "I guess we can settle this matter here as well as elsewhere. Don't you think so?"

And as he spoke he drew a revolver from his hip-pocket and laid it on the table.

Dunk gave vent to a gasp. He was trembling in every limb from fear—that was evident enough.

"What! you don't mean to do me harm, Sierra Sam," he articulated, faintly. "You are wrong in your estimation of me. I am not a murderer, nor did I have any designs against your life in coming here. I simply came to—"

"Make money out of me. But you cannot do that. I am always alive to all my personal interests, you bet, and able, as a general thing, to anticipate the moves of my enemies. I do not propose to harm you, sir; you are beneath my notice. But I want to show you that you are as powerless to do me harm as a new-born babe. You were sent here to kill me, and I am

going to give you a chance. I see you have a revolver in your belt. Please draw it, level it at my head and fire."

Dunk saw the cool Californian fold his arms across his breast, and a treacherous fire shot into his sunken eyes. He made an effort to move his hand toward his belt, but could not.

He tried to leap from his stool, but could not. Scarcely a muscle could he move, while an expression of excruciating torture came upon his cadaverous face.

Sierra Sam fairly roared with laughter, and picked up his revolver.

"You see you are mine, did I choose to use you!" he said. "See," and he touched a small knob, at one side of the table. "You were held by electricity, which the stool administered to you in such gradual currents that you were not aware anything was the matter, until you were powerless. You are now at liberty to go. Take the first stage back to Big Vista, or I'll shoot you the next time I see you. When you get to Big Vista tell all parties concerned to look out for the arrival of Sierra Sam, on the 5th of July! Go!"

Without further urging, Junius Brutus left the cabin. To all appearances, he was a very cowed and crestfallen man.

But within his heart, there rankled a vengeful, rancorous grudge against the calm man of the Sierras, and once outside the cabin he muttered:

"Yes, I will go back to Big Vista, and—"

The "and" was spoken with emphasis and seemed to imply a threat.

CHAPTER II.

MISTAKEN IN THE MAN.

"ALL aboard!" yelled the driver of the stage plying between Kunestown, Silver Spur and Big Vista. "All aboard! Next station is Big Vista!"

And he gave an extra emphatic crack to his long-lashed whip, to warn his would-be passengers that a start was to be made instant, from Silver Spur, where a halt had been made for supper.

A number of passengers poured out of the lunch saloon, eating as they came, and clambered into and onto the great vehicle, not anxious to get left at Silver Spur, where there was as yet but one solitary habitation toward the foundation of a great "city."

Among those who came last, and was consequently forced to resort to the top seats of the conveyance, were two characters likely to attract more than ordinary attention—the more, perhaps, owing to the great contrast in their personal appearance.

One was a young female, clad in top-boots, trousers, a long hunting shirt of knee length, belted at the waist, and a plumed sombrero—a girl of about seventeen summers, evidently, with a fresh, round, rosy, pretty face, sparkling dark eyes and happily-chiseled features—a girl who, although of a somewhat reckless nature, was amply able to take care of herself under all circumstances.

The revolvers in her belt may have increased this inference.

The other party was a meek-faced, clerical-looking individual, with a fringe of cravat-whiskers beneath his chin, and reaching to the ears. A pair of deep blue goggles shaded his eyes; his face was one of most sepulchral cast; his hair was bushy, streaked with white, and was topped out with a genuine Quaker, broad-brim hat.

Otherwise he was attired in fine broad-cloth, and being lame, walked with a cane.

It was with a great effort that he clambered to the top of the stage—at least he gave vent to enough grunts and "ums" and "ahs!" to indicate the fact of his physical disability.

The Girl Sport who had nimbly mounted, ahead of him, seemed to enjoy his attempt hugely, as did two other outside passengers, whom it may be well to describe here as they will figure somewhat during the progress of our little narrative.

The one was a typical specimen of the border rough. Not one of the evil-natured class, evidently, but of that bragging, blatant species commonly denominated in Western life as bull-whackers—a fiery red-haired, full red-bearded chap, the end of whose nose was as red as a cherry; whose eyes emitted a gleam of sluggish shrewdness, and whose attire was about as greasy and mud-begrimed as it well could be. His belt bristled with revolvers and knives, which it was evident he would not hesitate to use if it became necessary to do so.

The other man was of more dashing appearance—was possessed of a fine figure and cool,

handsome face, with clear, unwavering dark eyes, a firm, pleasant mouth, shaded by a graceful mustache; he also wore a trim imperial; his hair drooped to his shoulder; and altogether he looked and dressed remarkably like the frontier ferret, Sierra Sam.

The Quaker finally succeeded in gaining a seat on top of the coach; Jehu Jack gave his whip another crack, and away went the horses and conveyance down the rough mountain trail, just as the sun was setting over the rugged landscape now dotted here and there with summer's green.

From one side to the other swayed the ponderous coach, owing to the unevenness of the trail, threatening to capsize at any minute, and the clerical individual grew extremely alarmed.

"Stop! stop!" he cried out, to the driver.

"You'll have us killed! Drive slower, I say."

"Go to Jericho!" heartily responded Jehu; "I'm drivin' this yer stage, pards, an' I reckon I regulate ther momentum ter suit my own self!"

"Yas, uncle!" the Girl Sport interposed, eying the Quaker amusedly; "tain't no use gittin' skeart. Jehu Jack knows his Y, Z, &'s, you bet!"

"Verily I asked thee not for advice, unseemly-clad girl," was the retort, given in a chiding way.

"Oh! you don't, eh?" the girl queried, a slight flush coming to her cheeks. "Don't like my style o' gear, then?"

"Verily, I do not. I mought say I was never more shocked in my life, to witness such an unbecoming masquerade in a young woman. Verily the world groweth more and more sinful, each day. Ah! um!"

And he heaved a deep sigh, and held tighter to the railing, for fear he would be jerked off upon the rocks.

"Yas, you bet she grows right pat, every day!" the girl said. "Sorry ye dislike my togs tho', old gent, 'cause I'm a square gal, every day in a week, and kin lick any galoot as says I ain't. My handle is Trumps, that's my sheer of the game o' life, too. Jest put on male attire you see, because I want to vote; an' then, too, it makes locomotion easier. Bet yer boots ye'll get worse shocked, than at me, ef ye land down in Big Vista."

Obediah Potts, as he afterward gave his name, did not reply, but instinctively clapped his hand to the region of his trousers pocket, probably to see if his pocketbook was safe.

Trumps laughed at this.

"You'd better hang on to yer wallet, uncle," she suggested. "Et ain't an uncommon circumstance that this hyer hearse has been halted by road-agents, and the passengers relieved of their filthy lucre. Preachers don't stand no more show than pilgrims, wi' the knights of kleptomani."

"Bet yer boots they don't, or my name ain't Snodgrass the Snorter!" put in the bullwhacker.

"It don't matter ef a man's a parson or a Vanderbilt—the gents pocket his rhino jest the same. Guess 'tain't much the galoots wull ever get out o' Snodgrass the Snorter, tho'."

"Ye don't want ter go snortin' tew certain about that," Trumps warned, looking the man over with a single searching glance. "'Spect big men has to weaken when it comes to facin' road agents. S'pose tho', judgin' by your title, that you are some pumpkins when you're tew home!"

"Waal, I am that, you bet! I am bad—very bad!" Snodgrass asserted, with a dignified air, that was ludicrous in itself. "I am sometimes so bad that hull towns stampede to escape my vengeance. My principal holt is swallerin' men half-way, bitin' off their ears, an' spittin' 'em out. I allus breakfast on a pair of tender souse, dine on a bite of some galoot's clean-shaved cheek, and sup on a plump arm or spare rib. Oh! yes, I'm snortin' bad, am I, Snodgrass?"

And, with a grave shake of his head, the "bad" man drew a long, sharp-pointed dirk knife, and serenely proceeded to pick his pearly white teeth.

Obediah Potts smothered a groan of righteous horror, and cast a sidelong glance at the red-headed man of cannibalistic propensities.

If he had any idea of expressing his opinion of a man of such inhuman tastes, his intention was cut short by the sudden halting of the stage in a gloomy pass.

The cause was evident enough.

On every side of the coach swarmed a crowd of masked men, in red flannel shirts and black pants, top-boots and plumed slouch hats, and every man except one held a carbine leveled toward the coach.

The excepted man, who was burly of figure, and evidently the captain of the band, at once advanced toward the coach.

"Shell out, gentlemen!" he called out, sternly. "No time for parley. Your money or your lives!"

No one responded.

The group of passengers on top of the stage were evidently inclined to consider.

Obediah Potts's teeth began to chatter, although his face did not seem to grow particularly pale; and it struck Trumps, who was watching him, that the teeth-chatter was more a piece of acting than anything else.

"Come! come!" the road-agent chief cried. "If you don't pan out, I'll order fire. Ye can't trifle with me."

The inside passengers responded by handing out their pocketbooks; Trumps, Snodgrass the Snorter, and the long-haired passenger also handed over pocketbooks, somewhat noticeable for their flatness.

At which the captain growled.

"Say, this is a cussed poor haul!" he cried, with an oath. "Aire ye sure ye ain't got any better ter offer?"

"Better tackle outward-bound stages; they pan out better. Pilgrims generally go in broke and come out flush!" Trumps explained, with a laugh.

"Mebbe!" the captain responded. "Hello, old Quake! where's your mite?"

"Verily, sir, I am a minister of the Gospel, and my purse hath in it but sufficient to purchase a single meal!" Obediah said, faintly.

"Can't help it—shell out!" the captain ordered. "You're an old sinner, or ye'd let to-morrow look out for itself, accordin' to Scrip-ter. Tumble it down heer!"

With a groan, the solemn man obeyed; then the captain fixed his gaze upon the long-haired man upon the stage heretofore mentioned.

"Sierra Sam!" he cried. "You will be required to stop off and accompany us to headquarters. You're just the man we've been looking for!"

The long-haired man looked astonished.

"What d'ye mane!" he demanded, in a strong Irish accent. "I'm no Sierra Sam, at all, at all! Terry McNorrin's me name, sur, if ye plaze."

"But you see I don't 'plaze,' despite your well-feigned Irish brogue!" the road-agent declared. "You're Sierra Sam, plain enough to suit my notion; so pile down off from that stage instant, or I'll have you shot where you are!"

"But, the devil take yez, I'm not Sierra Sam!" McNorrin protested. "D'ye niver hear tell o' Teddy McFadden, the Irish Spotter? That's me—tho' me rael name is McNorrin."

"It don't matter! We can settle that at leisure. Down off from that coach, I say, before I count three, or you're a dead man!"

McNorrin saw that it was useless to disobey, as he would surely get the worst of it by so doing; so he reluctantly descended from the stage.

As he clambered down, Snodgrass, the bullwhacker, whispered:

"It needn't worry you; I'll get your release!"

"Get along with that stage!" yelled the captain, as the Irish Spotter stepped down upon the ground. "The next time ye come along, see that ye fetch much more swag!"

"Next time you'll get a lead chromo, maybe!" Trumps called out.

Then the stage rolled rapidly away, Jehu Jack whistling as merrily as if not nothing had happened.

It was not the first time his conveyance had been halted by these same gents of the trail, and therefore it was, as he remarked, "second nature to him."

After the departure of the stage-coach, McNorrin's arms were bound behind his back, and he was sent ahead of the main gang, in charge of two of the outlaws.

After leaving the pass, they struck a route up the bed of a little creek, which flowed through a transverse ravine.

Following this stream, by slow stages for an hour—for the water was knee-deep and wading was difficult—they finally emerged into a rocky pocket or mountain-surrounded valley, where some time there had evidently been an Indian village, for a number of skin lodges still stood in a circle.

McNorrin was taken to one of these lodges, and left there, only the captain remaining with him.

After taking a drink from a bottle that stood

upon a sort of deal table, the outlaw approached the Irishman, and looked him searchingly in the face.

"So you insist that you are not Sierra Sam, do you?" he demanded, his eyes gleaming through his mask savagely.

"Faith, and I do!" Terry replied. "Shure I niver heard divil a thing of Sierra Sam afore, and don't know a won of him."

"I know better. You see, I have an acquaintance who met you over in Flumeville, a bit of awhile ago, and you sent word you would be in Big Vista the fifth day of July. This is the 5th, and you are Sierra Sam."

"Beg the pardon of yez, but you lie like the divil!" Teddy declared unflinchingly. "I niver was in Flumeville in me life. D'ye mind the red-whiskered galoot on the stage?"

"Yes."

"Waal, sur, he spake in me ear, as I got off, not to be onaisy, as he'd fix it up all right for me—so very likely, that was your man, in disguise. An' ef the loikes of yez waits a proper length of time very likely yez will hear from him thet you'll hev to whistle before you get him."

The captain uttered a curse.

"If you should chance to be right, it is a remarkable coincidence, this chance resemblance, and all that saves your life!" he growled.

He then blew a whistle, and another road-agent entered.

"I say, King, look at this man sharply. Is this Sierra Sam?"

The road-agent stared hard at McNorin, and shook his head.

"Don't think so," he said. "The two are remarkably alike, however. Indeed, I can detect but one difference—that too, something no one else would notice."

The outlaw chief retired from the lodge in disgust.

Two days later he once more visited McNorin in the lodge where he had been confined.

"You were right," he said. "I have received a communication that satisfies me you are not Sierra Sam. Outside you will find a man ready to escort you back to the vicinity of Big Vista."

After the Irish Spotter was gone, the captain swore roundly, and took a letter from his pocket and opened it.

It ran as follows:

"BIG VISTA, July 5th, 18—.

"DE WOLF DEERING, SIR:—

"The man you took from the coach is not Sierra Sam, although Sierra Sam arrived here the same hour the coach did, and made inquiries for you. You had better return, when it shall please the writer of this to give you further information."

"Yours, etc., UNKNOWN."

"And who the devil is Unknown?" Deering grunted, as he tore the letter into shreds. "Possibly the male-attired girl who sassed me back from the coach. If so, I shall have to buy her off, or—"

CHAPTER III.

THE TWO SNODGRASSES.

BIG VISTA!

Location—in the Sierra Nevada.

Site—high up the mountain side, upon a natural shelving ledge or plateau, which overlooked the yawning gulf below, and beyond this a lower rugged broken range of hills, sparsely timbered and possessed of some rather wildly beautifully scenic qualities, not to the rugged eye of the miner, but to the eye romantic of the day-dreaming tourist.

It wasn't much of a city, Big Vista.

It possessed enough able-bodied men to work its quartz drifts, which ran back into the mountain; it had a small complement of gamblers, roughs and adventurers in general, such as are identical with nearly every mining camp, and that was about all, not forgetting that Big Vista possessed several citizens of the fairer sex.

Access was had to the place by a dizzy stage route that wormed its way down the mountain side, and through the gulf toward Silver Spur, but it was seldom traveled except by Jehu Jack's semi-weekly stage.

Of the business places in Big Vista might be mentioned, first of all, the post-office, which was located in a little cigar-store shanty superintended by one Angel; then followed a general store, five saloons, a smithy, ore-breaker and mill, several small enterprises, a theater and fifty shanties.

The "post-office," however, in the mind of some people, was the most attractive place of

interest in Big Vista, for the reason that it was superintended by the "purty gal" of the place.

Angel, she said her name was, when one morning she dropped down into the rough camp, but Angel what she did not mention, and "she was too purty ter quiz" as one man "allowed."

She said she was out of luck, and wanted to know if there was any sort of position in Big Vista where an honest and respectable girl could earn a decent living.

A meeting was at once held, and the question considered; and it was decided there was.

Chauncey Bloker, Big Vista's bleary-eyed P. M., had recently been suspicioned of horse-stealing, to say nothing of robbing the mails; so the aforesaid Bloker was immediately invited out to a lynch picnic, and Angel was installed in his place, at a moderate salary. She soon succeeded in saving up enough to purchase a stock of cigars and tobacco, and combined the two businesses profitably.

In some respects, the girl, with her seventeen or eighteen years, did not fall short of what her name implied.

It was no matter of secrecy that she was the prettiest piece of femininity that had ever set foot in Big Vista.

She possessed a figure of the medium stature of women, and of graceful outline; her face was one of exquisitely perfect lines, and soft rose-tinted complexion, set off with deep blue eyes of great power of expression, a pretty mouth, which always seemed ready to smile when there was anything pleasing; hair nu brown and luxuriant; hands white and shapely.

She always dressed plainly but yet neatly; her every move indicated grace and refinement. She was habitually agreeable to customers, but still enough reserved to preclude the possible idea that she cared to be sociable with any one.

This very fact made her more friends than she was aware of, even though it may have won her a few enemies.

One morning, nearly a week after the stage-coach robbery, Miss Angel was engaged in dusting off her cigar-case, and putting things to rights, when a shadow darkened the doorway, and looking up she saw a stranger standing upon the threshold.

It was the man of professed cannibalistic propensities, Snodgrass—surnamed the Snorter, and since his coming to Big Vista had been rechristened Kittens by some of the local bums, who had challenged him to knock off their hats, but without effect.

"Gude-mornin', mum!" spake Snodgrass, doffing his battered semblance of what at some remote period had been a plug hat. "This yer is an all-fired fine mornin', neow ain't it. The birds aire a-vocalizin' in the tree-tops—ther insects aire dronin' through sunlit etherialism—the busy wassup is suckin' the sugar-coated dew from the wild blossoms o' this yar oasis—and I'm sufferin' fer a smoke. Be-a-u-tiful mornin'!"

Angel flashed an inquiring, half-amused glance at the bullwhacker.

"Yes, it is quite pleasant this morning," she replied.

"Gorgeous!" Snodgrass declared, seeming to grow more assured, and stealing softly along to the counter. "How et do sublimify ther nature o' mortal humanity tew see things joggin' along so durned nice! I'm n aesthete, I am—cl'ar down to my heart's e'na'most corner, you bet, an' I worship natur's manifold wonders. But I also rather luv compressed lead-pencil-shaped editions o' tobacco, an' the fact is, my financial status air rather deteriorated at present. So, I thought I'd drap in to inquisitate ef ye ever trust!"

"Oh! yes—I trust in the All-Wise Providence, as every one should!" Miss Angel replied, dusting away vigorously. "That's the safest account one can run nowadays."

"But, ye see, I referred to the terbac?" Snodgrass declared, with a grin, which his red beard made ludicrous. "D'ye ever 'comydate broken-up pards wi' stick 'baccy, on tick?"

"Never!" Angel replied, shaking her head.

"Or, just hardly ever, so to speak?" the bullwhacker perpetrated, evidently believing he had made a hit.

"Never!" Angel said again. "I pay as I owe—I never owe. Good-day, sir!"

"But, see hyar!" protested the Snorter, "I ain't gone yet. I must have a smoke or I shall kerflummix right heer, frum sheer wantiveness. So set out yer dice, an' show yer angelic qualities."

"If you get beat—"

"I get nothin'!"

"If I get beat?"

"You've got ter set up ther best five-bit-ers your shebang boasts of!"

Angel smiled.

"Well, I guess your assurance deserves a treat," she said, reaching for the dice cup, and with one tip spilling five aces upon the counter. Snodgrass whistled his surprise.

"You be great, you be!" he allowed, only succeeding in turning a full hand.

Next time he threw less—three trays, and Angel quietly beat it with five fours, and restored the box to its place on the shelf.

Whereat Snodgrass looked blank.

"Alas! alas! such is fate!" he murmured, sadly. "I hearn et tell thet the women war tew much fer men at gamin', and I reckon she'm so."

"Well, I won't let you suffer," Angel said, smiling. "I may need to be befriended some day myself, so stick these in your vest pocket."

And she threw half a dozen good cigars out upon the counter.

Snodgrass gazed at her a moment in evident astonishment, then he picked up the cheroots with a hand nearly as white as Angel's own.

"Gal, you're a jewel!" he said, at the same time flipping a gold eagle out upon the counter. "Thou art an angel, fer sure,

'As fair at heart

'As fair complected,'

by gum! But, nuther am I a tramp, bet yer 'baccy on thet! I'm Snodgrass, I am, o' great appetizing renown—Snodgrass the Snorter, you bet!"

"Well, neew, pilgrim, I beg ter argy on thet leetle p'int!" a voice cried, and the post-office immediately afterward had another occupant.

Angel uttered a cry of astonishment, and rubbed her eyes to make sure she saw aright.

The new-comer was an exact counterpart, in every respect, of the man who had just tempted fortune at the dice-box.

As sharp-seeing a pair of eyes had Angel, as any person could well possess, but for the life of her she could not see an iota's difference between the two strangely met men.

Of exactly corresponding hight and size, dressed and dirt-splashed precisely the same, armed alike, and looking every inch alike in face and feature, there was no discernible difference between them. A photograph of one would have included the whole likeness of both.

Snodgrass No. 1 turned around and gazed at the new-comer in evident anger at the interference.

"Hello! great yowlin' wild-cats, what d'ye mean?" he roared.

"I mean thet you're a consarned lyin' deception—a consummate counterfeit—a designin', diabolical cheat!" the other cried, bristling up. "I'm the famous Snodgrass, the Snorter, right up from Sorrocco, ther bad, bad man who chews up humans fer fodder, I am, you bet!"

"Ditto hyer!" asserted No. 1. "My best holt is chawin' off ears, cheeks, arms, an' dissectin' ther delicacies o' fine old sparerib. Snodgrass am I, ther great, original bad-bad double-steam-chested Snorter, from Sorrocco city, you bet yer bonanzas, every day in a week and twice on Sunday!"

The two men looked at each other, something like a grim smile coming into their eyes.

"Waal, this beats my time!" No. 2 grunted, scratching his chin.

"Knocks me cl'ar off my base!" No. 1 sighed, picking his teeth with his bowie-knife. "You aire the cheekiest liar I ever met in my life, 'pon my cannibalistic honor."

"An' you're the cussedest lyin' fame-stealer I ever hearn tell on!" No. 2 fired back. "I am Snodgrass the Snorter!"

"I am Snodgrass the Snorter—you bet!" from No. 1.

"How ye goin' ter prove it?"

"How are you?"

"Dunno. Reckon thar's no way, except to settle it atwixt ourselves."

"That's sure as preachin'. Let's adjourn to some quiet spot, and square up."

"I'm willin'. Wait till I get some cigars," and No. 2 flung a gold eagle upon the counter, took a dozen cigars and the change Angel gave him; then the two Snodgrasses left the place and sauntered down the stage-trail, soon disappearing below the level of the great plateau.

Angel had followed them to the door, and gazed after them in curiosity.

"Well, that is the strangest occurrence I ever heard of," she murmured, with a puzzled look.

"I wonder, upon my word, which is Snodgrass? It is quite evident that one of them is, and one is not; but, which is which appears to be a co-

mundrum. Ha! ha! strange—strange! But, I haven't done so bad a trade, for a morning start. I wonder if those ten-dollar gold pieces are good? I scarcely glanced at them."

She went behind the counter, and took them from a box where she had previously placed them.

One of them was all right.

The back of the other one had been ground off, and a picture of a man engraved in the place of the official stamp!

It was a most expert piece of workmanship, and the picture was of a man of handsome face, with mustache, imperial, long hair, and slouch hat—a man whose appearance was of the type peculiar to the prairie scout.

Angel gazed at the face admiringly.

"That settles it!" she murmured. "One of those men was the negative of this likeness, in disguise. But, which one? True as I live, I don't know which man gave this coin!"

She tried to recollect, but could not, for she had taken only a quick glance at either eagle which had been given her.

"Oh! well; I'll keep it, and fall in love with the owner of the face. Maybe he will call for the coin," she said, aloud, with a merry laugh, as she slipped it into her pocket.

A step upon the threshold, just then, caused her to turn quickly around, her cheeks flushing scarlet.

"Oh! Mr. Deering, is it you?" she exclaimed. "You startled me."

"So I perceive," Deering said, advancing into the room. "Every one is liable to be startled!"

And he laughed, sarcastically.

He was a man of rather heavy build and medium stature; his dress was thoroughly "citizen," and faultless as regards fit and texture; his face was a commonplace one, of dusky complexion, possessing no particularly attractive feature; his eyes were jetty black, as was his hair, and his rather sensual mouth was shaded by a fierce looking mustache.

"By the way," he continued, as he saw the flush deepen upon her face, "who is the owner of the face upon the likeness you just slipped into your pocket?"

"It is not for you to know, Mr. Impudence," Angel responded. "It was not *your* picture."

"Oh! wasn't it?"

"Well, I guess not!"

"Pshaw, you are foolish, Angel, to be offish toward me. Where in all Big Vista can you find a better man to cling to through life?"

"Big Vista is such a great city that I really don't know," the girl replied dryly. "I've a wide world, though, to make my choice from."

"Pshaw. Your position is against you. Who do you imagine would have you, a cigar-store girl, but infatuated me?"

"Oh! my! What conceit! Supposing I should make an announcement that I was in the market—how many of Big Vista's pilgrims do you suppose would come to the fore?"

Deering scowled.

"None!" he said. "They all know better than to infringe on *my* claims. I don't tolerate such a thing as a rival, in anything!"

A man stepped into the store just then, and tipped his hat to Angel.

"Excuse me!" he said, "but could you tell me where I can find the residence of Miss Tabitha Green?"

CHAPTER IV.

TOO MANY ACES.

DE WOLF DEERING wheeled around with an oath at the query of the new-comer, and then added a second one.

The stranger who stood in the doorway was Sierra Sam.

Or was it the Irish Spotter, McNorrin?

These questions went quickly through Deering's mind.

"Oh! are *you* the man," Sam asked, with a smile, "who knows of the residence of Miss Green?"

"I reckon I am. What does it concern you?" Deering demanded, savagely.

"It concerns me to the extent that I am here to see this Miss Green," Sam replied, unruffled. "If you do not see fit to impart the information I desire, perhaps I can find out elsewhere."

"I can tell you—" Angel began, but Deering turned upon her so fiercely that she stopped speaking.

"You shut up!" he growled, "or it will be the worse for you."

Then he turned to the Sport.

"Who are you, and what do you want with Tabitha Green?" he demanded, taking a step nearer to the stranger.

"Emphatically it is none of your business, De Wolf Deering," was the prompt reply. "I didn't come here to make a man of your stamp acquainted with my business, by any means, so I'll bid you good-day."

De Wolf Deering did not follow him as he turned and strode away, but instead, turned to Angel.

"You see that galoot?" he queried, noting the fact that the girl was watching the Californian's retreating figure with interest.

"I see him, to be sure," Angel replied, coldly. "An attractive appearing person."

"Humph! he won't appear so attractive when he gets through with me, cuss him! D'ye know who he is?"

"It has just occurred to me," the girl nodded.

"Miss Green told me a few days since that her other nephew was coming here soon, and that she was going to choose between him and yourself as the heir to her wealth."

"She told you this, did she?" Deering hissed, his face growing darker than was usual. "She told you this?"

"She did; and I presume likely you will fall short of the liberal allowance of pocket-money you have had, through being the manager of her affairs," Angel answered, watching him with something like a triumphant expression in her eyes.

"Never! never!" Deering gritted, his face flaming with rage. "I'll teach this puppy, Sierra Sam, that he made a disastrous move when he came to Big Vista, mark my words. As for you, I do believe you would rejoice in my downfall."

"Of course, with all the angelic zest of my nature," she fired back. "I do not admire you, Mr. Deering—I told you that when I first came to listen to your would-be lovely proposals. Since then you have made yourself more and more obnoxious, until I assure you I cannot bear you. So please remember this, and govern yourself accordingly."

Deering glared at her in evident astonishment. It was the first time she had ever exhibited such independence and ruffled temper.

"Well, curse me if I ever expected *you* to turn on me in such a way," he ejaculated. "But you'll find you will lose by it. You shall yet learn to fear and love me at the same time, and you shall become the slave of my master will. The day is dawning when it shall become necessary for me to put on the screws, so to speak, and prove that my will here in Big Vista is law."

He turned then and left the store.

"Oh, you bad, wicked man!" Angel said after he was gone. "You are a desperado, but you'll find you cannot scare me. I'd rather be your enemy than your friend."

Miss Tabitha Green, spinster, the owner of the only paying mines in Big Vista, and the possessor of other wealth in money, bonds, etc., resided in a comfortable house near the center of the little town, in company with her pet cat, canary, poll-parrot, and house-plants, and with only one attendant, whose color was black, and who filled the position of domestic and man-of-all-work.

Claudia was his name, and he put on airs that indicated his equality with Big Vista's most important citizens.

Miss Green, although in the fifty-sixth year of single blessedness, was rather a shrewd, sociable woman, with less of the peevish old-maid characteristics than might have been expected of her; and she was friendly to all well-disposed persons.

But, although neighbors she had a plenty, she seldom was seen outside of her home, and spent the most of her time with her pets and plants.

During the same forenoon of the day that witnessed the unpleasant interview between Angel and De Wolf Deering, Claudia thrust his ebony visage in at the door of Miss Tabitha's room, and showed his ivories in a most ludicrous grin.

"Scuse me, missy, but dar's a man at de do' dat desires to interview de boss ob de house!" he said.

"A man, Claudia?" Miss Green cried, nervously. "What kind of a man?"

"White gem'man, missy—long hair, mustache, imperial—reg'lar masher, fo' suah!"

"Oh! my! and I haven't got my hair in papers even!" Miss Green murmured, smoothing out her apron, and adjusting the ruffled collar. "Show the gentleman in, Claudia."

The servant retired, and soon the same person who had inquired for Miss Green's abode, at the post-office, entered the room, closing the door behind him.

"My dear aunt!" he exclaimed, stepping for-

ward, with outstretched hand, "you can not guess how glad I am to meet you at last—you whom I have heard so much of, and long desired to meet!"

"Is it possible?" Miss Green gasped, rising—"can it be possible that you are really—"

"Sam Slocum, you bet!" the handsome man exclaimed, heartily. "I've been here several days, and finding out this was your abiding-place, I concluded to drop around and see you."

"I am so glad that you did. I have been wishing to see my elder sister's son very much!" and Miss Green shook hands with him, and they both became seated.

"So you are Sammy, are you?"

"I am, in truth. And you, I see, are my mother's much-talked-of maiden sister. I should know you by the strong resemblance you bear to my poor mother."

"Why, indeed; how strange! I always heard people say we bore no resemblance to each other, whatever."

"Oh! possibly in your younger days, you may have not. But, latterly, up to the time of my mother's decease, she looked very much like you."

"Ah! well, perhaps. You, I see, have grown up to be a strong, healthy and good-looking man. Have you any particular trade or profession, Sammy?"

"Oh! yes. I am independent, so far as that is concerned. I am a detective, and devote my time to hunting down evil-doers."

"Indeed! I am proud to know you are working in so good a cause. Have you seen De Wolf, your cousin? De Wolf is my right-hand man."

"Yes, I have seen him, and my impression of him is hardly favorable. I should judge you needed a left-hand man to watch the right."

"What! is it possible you do not fancy De Wolf? He is a very influential citizen, here in Big Vista, and has the whole charge of my business."

"You may regret having confidence in him," the new nephew said. "For my part, I do not take any stock in him, and don't care how soon he knows it."

About the same hour that Miss Green was entertaining her visitor, we change the scene to Big Vista's principal saloon, over the entrance to which was a sign bearing the inscription.

"FRENCH FAN'S 'FIND'."

It was a big barn-like one-story affair, of rough lumber, with no floor other than the rocky level of the plateau upon which the town was built.

There was the usual complement of chairs and tables, for the devotees of games of chance; there was a bar for the accommodation of the thirsty, and in one corner was a platform, where a vicious looking Italian was employed to grind out stereotyped strains of music from a nearly played-out hand-organ—which, by the way, was the best music the young camp could afford, or produce, the talent not running in that direction.

As we enter the saloon, we find the occupants to be a crowd of miners and gamblers, the usual *habitués* of places of the kind.

There were but few engaged in games, the majority lounging about, here and there, smoking and drinking and chatting.

At one table De Wolf Deering was lounging, idly drumming on the polished top, and allowing his gaze to follow the graceful figure of the proprietress of the place as she moved about.

She was a young woman, not far out of her teens, evidently, and possessed of a petite, gracefully-molded form, a fair, fascinating face, with eyes and mouth to match, and dressed and looked all too prettily for the position she occupied.

For, although no evil reports had ever assailed her, she was noted as an expert card-sharp and successful gambler.

Then, too, she was a daring woman who had faced many a ruffian down with revolver, and several *habitués* of her establishment had passed in their checks, so to speak, through the medium of her clever aim.

So that, altogether, she was regarded by the peaceable portion of the community as a desperate character, and generally avoided by them.

Except for this prejudice there was nothing apparently, to cause any one to say that she was aught but a perfect lady, for such was her habitual demeanor, when not aroused to anger by some insult by those of the unruly audience who frequented her place.

As she sauntered around where Deering was,

keeping an eye about the room, to see what was going on, he nodded to her, and said:

"You seem to be idle, this afternoon?"

"Yes, no business at all, to speak of. Perhaps you want to play?" and a musical laugh followed her words.

"Although always unlucky, when I play with you, I am not afraid of you!" he responded. "Sit down, and while you win a V from me, I want to talk with you."

"Very well. You can afford to lose money. But, for heaven's sake don't refer to your usual topic of conversation," she said, seating herself opposite him, and producing a pack of cards.

"You need not worry," Deering answered scowling. "I've given up loving any one but myself."

"A sensible resolution on your part; then, too, it saves me lots of pity for you," was her laughing declaration. "Really, Mr. Deering, I wouldn't wed the richest and best man the world affords!"

"Well, be that as it may, we will still be friends. Do you remember that I once did you a great service, Fan?"

"I am not apt to forget it," was the reply, and a strange expression soon came over her face.

"I thought you would not," he said, significantly. "It was the greatest service I ever have done any one. And now, when in trouble, I believe you would be willing to help me."

"Most certainly; what is it you want?"

"Well, I'll tell you. You remember I told you Sierra Sam was about to come here, and that there was a prospect that my old aunt would put him in my place, because I've an idea she has suspicions that I do not deal honestly with her in regard to the financial management of the mines."

"Yes."

"Well, this Sierra Sam has put in an appearance—not only once, but twice."

"Twice! How do you mean?"

"I mean that there are two men in this town who look precisely alike in every respect, and both, I have no doubt, will claim to be the original Sierra Sam."

"How strange. Which is right?"

"That remains to be told. There are also two roughs, Snodgrass by name, who are as exactly alike as the other two. One of these roughs is real; the other I have every reason to believe is the real Sierra Sam."

"And you don't know either of these respective two parties apart?"

"I do not. There is but one man who knows the two Sams apart."

"Who is that?"

"Junius Brutus Dunk."

"Ah! then perhaps he can give you the information you want?"

"But he will not do so. He has a scheme on foot to fetch forward one of these men as the rightful heir to a part of the wealth should Tabitha die. Which string he is working, I do not know. He admits no knowledge of either man, or that he is interested in either. Now, I want to find out which is the genuine Sierra Sam, my cousin, and I want you to do it for me, and mark him so I will know him. Then I'll settle the case of who is to be Tabitha Green's heir in short order."

"How am I to do this?"

"I'll leave that to your woman's wit. You find out for me, and I'll give you five thousand dollars clear cash. You know I am good for it. Sh! as I live, here comes one of the Sams!"

They went to playing very briskly as Sierra Sam came sauntering along, his movements characterized by grace and ease, and his face as handsome as was the usual wont of the famous frontier ferret.

Leisurely along to the table he sauntered, and there paused, his hands carelessly locked behind his hips and a cigar in his mouth.

"Well, what do you want?" Deering growled, looking at him with a savage scowl.

"Nothing particularly," was the composed answer, "except that I observe you have one more ace of hearts in your hand than is allowable in the general games of cards."

French Fan quickly reached over, snatching the cards from Deering's hand, and perceived that the stranger was right.

Deering quickly arose, whipping a revolver from his hip holster.

Sierra Sam kept his hands locked behind his back, a sarcastic smile upon his face.

"So you propose to shoot me, eh?" he said, unconcernedly.

"Curse you, yes!" Deering howled, raising his hand and taking aim.

But he didn't fire.

CHAPTER V.

A STRANGE DUEL.

THERE came an interruption, in the shape of another pistol-shot, which struck the hammer of Deering's weapon and smashed it, thereby making it for the time, worthless.

The next instant, there sprung forward a girlish figure, clad in semi-male attire, and confronted the mine superintendent—a pair of six-shooters, cocked and leveled in her grasp.

"Hey! hello thar, will ye!" she cried. "Shoot this purty feller, will ye? Well, I guess not. My name's Trumps, every day in a week, and I'll jest hitch onter ther Sport hyer, as a pard, and stand by him!" she cried.

"Cuss ye! what d'ye mean?" Deering demanded. "Put up your tools, and get out of here, or I will soon put you out!"

"Bah! Who's afraid of you? I ain't!" Miss Trumps declared, emphatically. "I've seen a feller of about your size, before, and didn't skeer fer a cent. D'ye want I should locate the meeting?"

"I'll murder you, if you do," Deering hissed. "I'll see you later. In the mean time, this tramp owes me an apology!"

And he nodded to Sierra Sam.

"In what way do I owe you an apology, pray?" Sierra Sam queried, his eyes scanning the face of Deering with a stern gaze.

"Oh! for exposing his exceeding good hand!" French Fan said, laughing.

Her eyes and the brilliant orbs of Sierra Sam then met, and seemed for the instant to read each other's thoughts.

Then the French beauty's gaze dropped, and a soft flush suffused her cheek, in which the Californian read the secret of her instant admiration for him.

"Exactly!" Deering announced, with an oath. "You sailed in here and lipped into my game, an' ye've got to apologize or give me satisfaction. D'ye know who I am?"

"You are my estimable cousin, judging by your polished manner!" Sam replied, with biting sarcasm.

"Then ye claim to be Sierra Sam, do you?" Deering growled.

"Why, of course! Why not? The other individual is an impostor!"

"So you say; what does he say?"

"Don't know, sir. I haven't interviewed him, as yet. Does he claim to be Sierra Sam?"

"Yes, he does, an' all I want to find out is, which is the genuine. I'll then make Big Vista too hot for him to live in it!"

"Oh! will you? Why not proceed directly to business, then, for I am undoubtedly the genuine Slocum, of the Sierras."

"That remains to be proven, yet. However, you must apologize to me, or fight—take your choice. I never receive an insult without retaliating, you bet!"

"As your dutiful cousin, I must admire your grit, and if necessary, accommodate you. I never apologize, without strong cause, so nominate your weapons, and I'm ready. The sooner I dispose of you, the better show I shall stand of inheriting Aunt Tabitha's gold mines."

"You'll never get 'em, nor the other feller, either!" Deering growled. "I do not care to have an open and disgraceful public fight, with you, sir, but I see that it is necessary."

"Positively so," Sierra Sam assured. "I haven't had a good square row, in over a month, and rather do for you than most any man I know. A pretty good way to settle, is to get up on top of the house ridge, and engage in a fist combat—the man who gets tumbled off the roof, to be considered the satisfied man. How does that strike you? It's quite the favorite method up where I came from, as it is as fair for one as it is for the other, and at the same time pleases the boys. I'm in for anything that pleases the boys, you bet, or the girls, either!"

"Good fer yer! You're a brick, and I'm your pard, through thick and thin!" cried Trumps, taking her place beside the Sport. "What d'ye say, Serious—can't I have that honor?"

"Well, that remains for you to say, as I am not personally forming partnerships nowadays!" Sam responded.

"Ken't help that, Sammy! I'm a lone orphan, 'thout any big brother, an' I've got to cling to some one, so I'd just as lief take you as any one else. I ain't afeared to sass or shute the biggest rough that ever walked, an' when it comes to counterplotting ag'in' sich fellers as De Wolf Deering, I'm thar!"

"Well, use your own judgment about your actions, and look out you don't get the rival sons of the Sierras mixed up. Now, cousin, what say?"

"You have the choice—we will adopt your plan!" Deering answered. "I am glad to have so good a chance to make an exhibition of you. Meet me on the roof of this place half an hour hence."

"Kerect!" Sierra Sam assented, as the superintendent of Miss Tabitha Green's mines left the saloon.

The excitement now began to ripen. A duel, and especially one of such a peculiar character, was not an everyday occurrence in Big Vista's little out-of-the-way camp.

It had already leaked out, pretty generally, concerning the two Sierra Sams, and the object which brought them to Big Vista; consequently there was a growing curiosity among the citizens to know who really was Miss Tabitha Green's nephew, and how the matter was destined to end.

As soon as Deering was gone, French Fan walked over to a quiet part of the room, and motioned Sierra Sam to follow her, which he did, in some surprise.

"Did you wish to speak to me?" he interrogated, watching her inquiringly.

"Yes, I do," she replied. "I want you to take me into your confidence, and tell me for true and honest if you are the real Sierra Sam."

"Why do you ask? That is something which at present seems to be an interested question to some people."

"I ask from simple curiosity. Then, too, if you are the genuine, it may be to your interest to prove it to me."

"I cannot see how. I claim to be the original Sierra Sam—otherwise, Sam Slocum. The other man claims likewise, and it remains to be seen which is right. Further, I have nothing to say on the subject, for the benefit of any one who may have designs to accomplish. When the time comes, one of us will undoubtedly come in as successor of De Wolf Deering!"

"You think he will be ousted then?"

"I hope so, for he is an out-and-out rascal, and the law is likely to become interested in him."

"Oh! I see. Humph!"

She nodded, and smiled, knowingly—one of her fascinating smiles, which she appeared to know how to use with good effect upon the sterner sex.

What her "humph!" meant, Samuel did not comprehend, but he came to the conclusion that she had formed an opinion, whatever it might be.

"Well, I hope you will win. Privately, between you and me, De Wolf Deering ought to be removed, and if you want a missing link to accomplish such an event, apply to me, and perhaps I can supply it."

"You?"

"Yes. I know it is rather natural you should regard me as a suspicious person, owing to my position here. But, in time you will change your estimation, and know that French Fan has a woman's heart, a woman's wit, and a woman's honor."

"Your position here need not necessarily condemn you!" Sam declared. "I have known very estimable women to run places of this kind. You will excuse me, I trust, while I prepare for the aerial meeting."

"Certainly, but will you for a moment, before you go, allow me to offer you a friend's advice? First, look out for the fresh young woman who declares her intention of becoming your 'pard.' Snakes are numerous in the mountains wet seasons. Also, look out for another certain pretty young lady in this place, whom you may meet. Although fair to outward view, take my word for it, you will find her far from being an angel."

"Thank you; I will bear your advice in mind," Sam answered, bowing himself away, rather glad to get out of the light of what he felt sure were a dangerous pair of eyes.

"A devil, she, in fairy guise, yet pretty enough to adorn a castle!" was his inward comment, as he left the saloon to fulfill his engagement.

The street in front of the "Find" was already crowded with miners, citizens and roughs, the news of the house-top duel having already spread throughout the camp.

Deering was waiting in readiness, having stripped to the waist.

He was a powerfully-built man, of exceeding muscular development, and "showed off" to advantage, and was surrounded by a crowd of his admirers.

Sierra Sam surveyed him with a cynical smile.

"Hello! what's the matter? Going in swimming!" he demanded, lighting a cigar.

"No—I'm going to knock you out of time, though!" Deering swore. "Get ready!"

"I'm all ready. You needn't have taken off your clothing; you may need a feather-bed wrapped around you, to save you from getting your neck broke!"

The crowd laughed—at least a part did—and Deering gave vent to his enraged feelings in a string of oaths.

A ladder was provided, and the two men clambered up to the steep roof of French Fan's Find, after which the ladder was taken away.

They soon gained standing positions upon the ridge, facing each other, and made a somewhat novel picture, considering the circumstances.

At least, so it appeared to the spectators, of whom the crowd below did not form the entirety.

In front of Miss Green's shanty stood Sierra Sam No. 2, and the ancient maiden lady herself.

"You see it is as I told you," No. 2 was saying. "This fellow who looks like me is a ruffian, and hearing of me, undoubtedly comes to dispute my right as being your nephew, thereby thinking to have me ousted and establish himself, with a view to the future—something I never even consider."

In front of the "post-offis" stood Miss Angel and a very superannuated individual of cadaverous countenance by the name of Junius Brutus Dunk.

"Oh! Mr. Dunk, are they really going to fight?" pretty Miss Angel asked, anxiously.

"Yes—you see for yourself. The fellow went into Fan's and insulted Deering, and he challenged him to fight. If I am not mistaken Mr. Sam will get his fill."

"Pshaw! I don't believe it. Mr. Dunk, which is the real Sierra Sam?"

The lean man smiled.

"If I know, it's my secret, till I make a spec' out of it. So long as all other eyes can discover difference between them, I'm sure I am not going to expose the impostor for nothing."

"You are a bad man, Mr. Dunk."

"Pooh! no!"

"Then tell me this: which man are you putting forward—the right or the wrong?"

"Ask the winds—not me. Watch the acting—for it must be acting on the part of one. If you find out, I'll treat. Ah! look—they strike a professional attitude now. They'll get down to business directly!"

"I hope Deering will get punished," Angel said.

Upon the ridge of the roof, stood Sierra Sam and De Wolf Deering, ready to decide the strange contest.

"How is this to be?" Sam asked, loud enough so that his words could be heard below.

"Hit as you can—catch as you can!" Deering replied. "I only want one whack at you!"

"You may not get even that," Sam replied coolly.

They began sparring—that is to say, carefully "feeling" each other.

Deering was dark and sinister in appearance—a malicious, vengeful light, burning in his eyes.

Sierra Sam was calm and calculating, a faint expression of reckless confidence upon his handsome face.

He wore his boots, while Deering was in his stocking feet, which gave him a decided advantage upon the slippery roof.

After several minutes of sparring Sam got in a hefty blow upon his adversary's nose, which nearly upset him, and caused the blood to flow, freely.

"Curses on your soul!" Deering gasped, recovering his equilibrium, with an effort. "I'll tear your heart out!"

He rushed forward and grasped Sam around the waist, and attempted to hurl him from the roof, but failed.

The Californian tore loose his opponent's grasp with a powerful effort—then, with a sudden movement, which astonished the spectators and caused them to hold their breath, he raised Deering bodily in his arms, as though he had been an infant, and dashed along the roof.

What was he about to do?

A hundred such queries passed among the astounded spectators; they fairly stood on tip-toe in their eagerness to know the result.

At the middle of the ridge, was a large chimney, with a cavernous opening, which communicated with a large open fire-place, in the saloon below.

Straight to this chimney the dare-devil Californian bore his victim—an instant later, despite his most desperate efforts, Deering was raised, and chucked down the chimney, head-foremost!

While Sierra Sam sprung into the air, turned a double summerset, and landed safely upon his feet on the ground among the crowd!

"Was it done fair, gents?" he demanded, a moment later, with the utmost coolness. "He said catch-as-you can!"

The majority of the crowd gave a yell of assent.

"On course et war fair—fair as ther fairy thet tempted old Adam!" cried a stentorian voice, and Snodgrass the Snorter pushed forward. "Sam", ye durned long-haired galoot, ef evyer I want'er die suddint, I'll choose atwixt you an' greased lightnin'. Gents, et war all did as fair as evyer my old hoss did kick, an' I propose we form inter a cor'ners jury, an' sot upon the Deering defunct!"

"That's not necessary!" the girl, Trumps, cried. "Heer he cums, now. Oh! my!"

It was so.

Deering emerged from the saloon, at this juncture, but such a sorry-looking wretch of humanity had never before been seen, in Big Vista.

He was perfectly black, from top to toe, with soot; his left arm hung limp and useless, by his side; the hair was nearly singed off his head, and his face somewhat burned.

There chanced to be a small fire in the fire-place at this time, which had done the latter mischief.

"Where is Sierra Sam?" he roared, as the crowd gazed at him.

Ay, where was Sierra Sam?

The crowd looked around among themselves and echoed the query, for as if by magic had the Californian mysteriously disappeared.

CHAPTER VI.

A STRIKE.

YES, the son of the Sierras who had been the cause of De Wolf Deering's woeful flight, had as completely and mysteriously vanished from view as if the earth had opened and swallowed him.

But he had not flown to escape Deering, by any means, for he stepped out of the "Find" an instant later, a smile upon his face.

"Well, cuz, how do you feel? Sorry to see you have fared so badly!" he said, surveying the discomfited villain laughingly—for Deering really did present a most grotesquely used-up appearance.

"Curse you! I'll get even with you for this!" Deering responded, savagely. "Your life-blood shall pay for the insult, mark my word!"

Then, having delivered himself of the threat, he turned and limped away toward his shanty, followed by a laugh from the crowd.

He heard the laugh, and turned to shake his fist back at his tormentors.

"We'll pay for that laugh," one miner said, dubiously.

"How do you mean?" another demanded.

"What kin the boss do?"

"Ye'll see! Ye remember we laffed at him once afore, an' he cut down our wages, twenty-five cents on the dollar!"

"Bah! he dassent do it, now! He's got reason to go slow, now!" and the speaker cast a glance at Sierra Sam No. 1.

"Ken't help that—don't believe it'll hinder his spite. Jest you watch out fer a sign at the office, o' twenty-five per cent. reduction!"

"Durn my skin if I'll stand it!"

"Nor I," put in one of the oldest gang bosses in Big Vista. "We're workin' fer durned low wages, now. Why, the men up at Flumeville aire gittin' more than us since we were cut down!"

"On course!" assented another. "An' I tell ye what, I don't believe old Tabitha knows a thing about the former cut. Et jest strikes me that Deering is putting the 'cut' money in his own pocket."

"Sh! better not let the boss heer o' these suspicions," added still another miner. "He is powerful, ye know, an' things generally goes ther way he wants."

"Tain't goin' ter be so, allus!" old Stockton, the veteran gang-boss grunted. "Right yonder, ter my notion, stands the kerect Sam Slocum, an' ef he be ther genywine, he's a man every inch o' him, an' I'd not hesitate ter foller his lead."

The speech had a powerful effect on the little knot of miners who were discussing the probable turn of De Wolf Deering's anger, and they eyed Sierra Sam curiously as the graceful sport leaned against one corner of the saloon smoking.

"Ye think that's the genywine, do you?" a miner named Durham asked.

"In truth I do," Stockton protested. "I've

heard o' this Sierra Sam afore, an' this feller suits the description to a dot—cool as a cucumber, and handsome as a Hercules, and brave to a fault."

"But hev ye seen t'other feller?"

"Yas—thar he is, over at old Tabitha's now, a-tryin' ter git in his work of establishin' himself, afore this chap offers any opposition."

"Do the two look alike?"

"Alike as two peas. I can't tell 'em apart, so far as looks is concerned!" Stockton replied.

"Then, why not mark this feller hyar? We may want to use him."

The idea seemed to strike the group favorably—all except Stockton, who shook his head grimly.

"Thet won't do, b'yees, fer et's dangerous ter fool around him. Jest wait. Ef Devil Deering lowers wages, I fer one o' ye will strike—then it will be time enough to call upon him."

The opportunity to strike came, as one of the miners had prophesied.

Deering went from the saloon first of all, to the superintendent's office, of which he had control, and soon after a placard was tacked by him on the outside of the door, after which he betook himself to his cabin to make some repairs in his appearance.

Stockton and several other miners, as soon as they discovered the placard, went over to the office, which was situated in one end of the ore-mill, and perused the notice with lively interest.

This was what they read:

"NOTICE!
On and after this date, all the men employed in the interests of Tabitha Green, as miners, millers, bullwhackers and operatives, will be subject to a reduction in wages, of twenty-five per cent. of former prices.

"DE WOLF DEERING, Supt."

"Thar! didn't I tell ye?" exclaimed Drake, the man who had first forewarned the result of the crowd's laugh at Deering's expense. "Ye see et war jest as I told ye, don't ye?"

"Yas, an' et's enuff," old Stockton growled. "Ther durned tyrant won't make his game work! Hurra! let's canvass ther town, and see how many will strike fer better wages!"

It was a thrilling hour.

The canvass was actively begun, and men hurried to and fro excitedly.

The news of the reduction was carried into the shafts, where the day gang were at work, and two-thirds of the number immediately quit work, shouldered their tools, and trudged up the drifts into the town.

By the time night had fairly dawned over the cloud city, and the moonlight had beautified the rough natural vistas that stretched away to the eastward, the single street was crowded with an angry populace, and every mouth helped to make greater the Babel of discussion.

Sierra Sam No. 1 happened along about this time, near Miss Angel's cigar store, and found that pretty personage standing in the doorway, surveying the assembling of the populace, with a face expressive of anxious surprise, and eyes glowing grandly.

"Oh! sir!" she exclaimed, as she saw the Californian, "will you be so kind as to tell me what is the matter?"

"Certainly. There is a strike impending, I believe, because Deering, the superintendent, has reduced wages," Sam replied, not particularly sorry that she had given him an opportunity to pause in his stroll.

"Oh! how mean!" cried Angel. "It is just a shame. The miners of Big Vista are not getting nearly so much as those of Flumeville, as it is, without this second reduction."

"So I am aware," Sam assented. "It seems like tyranny on the part of Deering to try and grind his employes down, in order that he may personally pocket the more."

"Oh! that's his lay-out every day in a week," the girl averred. "The strike is apt to help you, is it not? The men will naturally want a leader, and who is more desirable than the future heir of Aunt Tab?"

"Humph! You remember there are two heirs, apparently—perhaps it would be better to say three candidates."

"Pooh! Let every one have their own opinion—I have mine. Have a cigar?"

And Miss Angel stepped briskly into the store, behind the counter, and set forth a box of Reinas.

For Sam to have refused would have been ungentlemanly, and besides, he was quite enamored of the pretty postmistress already.

She put him much in mind of Capitola, a former flame, who had lost herself from him somewhere in the broad West, and left a tinge of regret to gnaw away at his heart-strings.

"I think you will find those very pleasant cigars," Angel chatted on. "Do you think the strike will last long? You know the majority of the miners who have families, have nothing to depend on but their daily earnings, and the loss of pay will go hard with them."

"I do not anticipate any protracted difficulty!" Sam answered. "Probably the men will be set to work again by Miss Green's orders."

"Ah! Why do you not call her aunty?" and Angel laughed, rather inquiringly.

"Oh! time enough for that, when she recognizes me as her beloved nephew, Sammy!" he assumed, dryly. "At the present time, my rival seems to have the advantage grip, by having got into the graces of the much-coveted maiden aunt. It may signify that I'm left—again, it may not."

"I sincerely hope you are not. It would seem nice to have a gentleman in Deering's place. By the way, you rather got the best of him in the fight."

"Well I don't know. I tossed him down the chimney, to see how he would look blacked-up, in minstrel style, and I guess he got rather the worst part of the duel. A doctor and a bottle of hair-restorer, will put him to rights, however, I think."

Angel laughed, merrily.

An observer would have argued that she was a strong admirer of the sturdy Californian; while he felt a decided liking growing upon him, for the pretty distributor of Uncle Sam's mail, whose free and artless manner was a sufficient guarantee of her purity.

At this juncture, old Stockton, the gang-boss, thrust his head in at the door.

"I say, Cap, d'ye mind givin' me a private grip on yer ear, fer a minnit or two?" he asked.

"Well, providing you'll not decapitate my organ of hearing, I don't know that I can object," Sam returned, with a smile.

Then nodding to Angel, and giving her an admiring glance, he followed the old miner out into the moonlight.

Not far away a little group of a dozen miners were evidently waiting for them, but Stockton stopped, before he reached them.

"Now, see hyar, boss," he said, "I s'pose you're knowin' to Deering's spite on us, 'case we l'ffed at his predicament. Waal, he's gone and put us down on wages. D'ye call that right, considerin'?"

"Certainly not," Sam replied.

"That's jest our notion, an' thar's a part o' us w'at ain't a-goin' ter stand it. We've tharfore struck for higher wages, an' we want a capt'in. You're ther chap who orter hev charge, in Deering's place, an' we're willin' ter back you through."

"You take too much stock in an utter stranger. You have no surety but what I'm an impostor!" Sam suggested.

"I'll stake my life that you're the real Sierra Sam, an' ther boys is all o' my thinkin'!" the veteran declared. "An' so we're anxious ter hev ye lead us. We've sent to Deering demanding our back pay, an' ef ye join us, we're goin' ter notify old Tab that she kin get a new superintendent, or we won't go to work, at any terms."

"Have the whole of the miners joined in this movement?"

"No. Thar's a lot on 'em—mostly roughs, who sw'ar they'll stand by Deering, through thick and thin; so it's about tie who will go to work and who won't. Deering's men aire chaps who hold ther softest snaps so fur as work is concerned."

Sierra Sam was silent a few moments; he was evidently considering matters.

"Well, I don't know as I can refuse you, since you have chosen me as your leader," he said, "but I want you to understand one thing—you must not kick if it is proven that I am not the genuine Sierra Sam!"

"Nary a kick! I'll vouch every man will stand by ye like a brother, fer we're all satisfied you're the genuine, an' no sorter proof won't convince us otherwise. Et'll go hard wi' Big Vista, ef ye ain't given a fair shake, or my name ain't old Stump Stockton!"

"I am glad to see you've got the true metal!" Sam asserted, grasping the veteran's hand, "and here's to say that I'll do my level best by you. So call your men together, and we will organize, so to speak, and see what is best to do!"

Stockton ambled off in high glee, and soon, one by one, had the men gathering about the handsome, fearless son of the Sierras.

When all were collected there was indeed a motley assemblage, in which was represented many types of the human countenance.

Sam looked them all over from his position upon a little elevation or knoll above them—noted each face and memorized its lineaments and character lines; then turned to old Stockton.

"These are the men, Mr. Stockton, who have seen fit to bestow upon me the honor of being their leader?" he asked.

Stockton had no need to answer. The crowd gave vent to a hearty shout of assent that signalized their acceptance.

"Yas, them's the lads, an' I opine they're all as good as old Tabitha Green's gold," Stockton answered, proudly.

"I am sure of that, and proud to have the honor of commanding you, gentlemen, in a just cause—that of a revolt against tyranny!" the Californian said. "And to handle this case in a careful and judicious manner, boys, it becomes us to act as one person, all together, and as brothers. We must form our plans and fulfill them. But before any plans are formed, does it not behoove us to make sure there are no enemies among us, who will profit by our conference?"

CHAPTER VII.

SAM AND TABITHA.

It was something that probably few of the strikers would have thought of.

"You're right," old Stockton announced: "jest let me look through ther crowd, an' I'll soon tell ye ef all present can be depended upon."

He looked them over, one by one, and soon came to the long, angular figure of Junius Brutus Dunk.

"Aha! you're heer, aire ye?" the veteran exclaimed. "Ye're heer, a-tryin' ter poke yer nose into our business, aire ye?"

"Oh, no! I am on a strike, too," the cadaverous man declared.

"Yas, I see you aire, in a horn!" Stockton retorted. "So am I, an' ef ye don't dust right along out o' this vicinity, I'll strike ye so hard ye won't never be able to collect yer bones together again!"

"Then you won't take me in?"

"No, we won't! You're a sneakin' rascal and as treacherous as a Snake Injun, an' ye can't hang around this crowd."

"Very well. I've no desire to stay where I am not wanted," the villain said, and he forthwith trudged away.

Stockton then finished his inspection of the crowd, and declared that all the rest could be set down as "solid" to the interests of the party.

"Well, then, we will proceed to business," Sam said. "I believe we all understand that I, Sierra Sam, am chosen leader in this movement."

The men gave a hearty "Ay!"

There could be no doubt of their indorsement of their choice.

"In that case," Sam pursued, "I shall figure for your welfare alone. As I understand it from Stockton, you have, as a body, decided not to go to work at any price, until Miss Tabitha Green establishes a new superintendent for her mines?"

"You bet! that's ther ticket precisely," old Stockton declared, and the men echoed his sentiments. "Nary a whack of a pick will we give till we git Flumeville wages and a new superintendent."

"Very well. Now I reckon the best thing I can do for you is to personally visit Miss Green in your behalf and lay the matter before her. I've an idea she may be dealt with in this way. But first of all, you will have to nominate whom you want to fill Deering's place."

"You! you!" shouted Stockton.

"You, of course! Hurra fer Sierra Sam the original!" shouted miner Durham.

And the others echoed the two speakers' choice clamorously.

"No, gentlemen; I cannot agree to that!" Sam returned, quickly. "I have no desire to crowd myself forward into Miss Green's affairs in this way. I propose that your gang-boss here is the proper man to hold the position of superintendent. He is evidently a veteran at the mining business, and with your approval I shall be glad to put forward his name."

The speech hit the rough audience in a tender spot. Stockton evidently had been thought of, but had been ruled out, out of deference for the new captain, whom all seemed desirous of honoring with the position.

Therefore, a cheer went up, and Stockton was hoisted upon the shoulders of a number of miners and marched about.

While this was going on, Sierra Sam an-

nounced his intention of visiting Aunt Tabitha, to see what could be done with her.

Thus the meeting broke up, and he took his way to the Green residence, in behalf of the strikers.

He half expected his rap at the door would be answered by De Wolf Deering, but such was not the case.

The sable servant, Claudie, soon appeared, and as soon as he saw the Californian, opened the door to admit him, evidently mistaking him for Sierra Sam number two.

"Ebenin', Marse Sam!" he said, bowing low.

"Been out for a walk?"

"Yes, rather," Sam replied, dropping into the situation gracefully, and tossing Claudie a cigar.

"Show me into aunty's presence, please."

"Right yar, sah!" the worthy dorky said, opening the door of Miss Green's sitting-room.

"Walk in, sah!"

Sam did walk in.

"Now for it," he said to himself—greatest composure must go with shrewd carefulness, in order for him to play his rival's part.

Miss Green was seated in her comfortable chair, engaged with crochet work, and looked up with a welcome smile, as Sam entered, seated himself, and tossed his hat upon the sofa.

"Well, have you been out for a stroll, Sammy?" she asked, pleasantly, looking inquiringly at him, through her glasses.

"Yes, I've been up to see how the strike is progressing."

"Well, how do things look, dear?"

"Bad. I fear all will not be as well as I first anticipated. It may end in bloodshed, for all I know."

"Oh! dear. It is too bad."

"Yes. I think there is only one way to settle it. Deering is not a favorite, with the majority of the men, and they swear they'll not go to work until he is removed, and old Stockton put in his place, and their wages raise to Flumeville prices. So they enlisted me to come and lay the facts before you."

"You? Why, I thought that they were trying to league themselves with the pretending Sierra Sam, who abused De Wolf!"

"They elected him their captain, because he believed their demands were just and fair. I am the Sierra Sam you just referred to as pretending, and I am the genuine original Sam Slocum, too, you bet!"

Miss Green fairly gasped with amazement, and rubbed her glasses, in order to get a better look at him.

"Do tell!" she exclaimed. "Why, I did really think you were my nephew Sammy, who went out for a stroll."

"So I am your nephew, Sammy, but not the sleek-tongued impostor who has visited you, ahead of me, and tried to palm himself off on you as the real Samuel Slocum."

"This is very strange, sir. How am I to know which of you is basely deceiving me?"

"That, you must judge for yourself," Sam answered.

"It is a strange fact that we closely resemble each other, and, therefore, no wonder that the other man should wish to step into your shoes when you get ready to step out. As for myself, I will have nothing to do with your affairs, further than to prevent you, so far as in my power, from fostering a lying humbug. My professional services bring me in sufficient wealth, for my moderate demands, and I have no desire to become your heir—indeed, I will not. So please understand that. And, now, as I came in behalf of the miners, please let me know what you propose to do."

"I shall have to hold that matter under careful consideration," Miss Green said, rather stiffly. "This matter of rivalry I shall also consider, but I may as well tell you that I have no faith in your claims. The other gentleman seems the most like my dear dead sister's child."

"All right! Suit yourself, and you will suit me," Sam declared, arising. "The man Deering is a consummate rascal, and the sooner you get rid of him the more riches you will have to bestow upon the Sam'l of your choice."

Then, with a bow, the Californian left the room, leaving the maiden mine-owner to her own reflections.

If he had succeeded in accomplishing no more, he had at least let her know his opinion. If she would profit by it or not he could not tell, but he was determined that Sierra Sam number two should not reign as owner of the Big Vista mines without a struggle.

Later that night Big Vista was wrapt in silence.

The street was cleared of its usual throng of miners, the saloons were shut up, and slumber seemed to overhang the mountain town.

But every one slumbered not.

Just below the level of the great plateau where the town was built, and at one side of the tortuous descending stage trail, stood an old old cabin, which was partly overgrown with moss and vines, and deserted. The windows were boarded up, and upon the door was nailed a white board, upon which was painted in letters of black the single word:

"SMALL-POX."

The history of the old ranch was unknown.

When some lone prospectors first discovered gold where now stood Big Vista, the old cabin had stood just where it stood now, and the same sign was upon its door.

The usual invasion of miners followed, but no one had ever disturbed the small-pox cabin, so far as was known.

It is well known by those who are acquainted with Western people that as a rule they have a great terror of small-pox, and rarely go nearer to where it has ever raged than is absolutely necessary.

The Big Vistans were no exception to the rule, and whenever called upon to pass the ranch, they did so in double-quick time.

Even Jehu Jack always drove faster than usual while passing the place, and being of a waggish disposition, often added to the offending cabin's notoriety by telling of hearing awful shrieks and groans when making night trips past it.

To-night the moon's bright rays streamed down upon the place with rather spectral effect, and the breeze sighed under the eaves of the slab roof with a lonely sort of moan.

At such an hour human presence could hardly have been expected in the vicinity, yet from the direction of the town came a black-clad figure down the trail, and paused in front of the cabin door.

A person of medium stature was this, clad from top to toe in a coarse somber black, with a full black mask upon the face, black gloves upon the hands, and a black sombrero upon the head.

Upon the breast of the closely-buttoned coat was a brass letter "A."

In front of the cabin paused this figure, and waited.

Evidently some one else was expected, judging by his glances up the trail.

Soon another man came down the trail, and joined the first one in front of the cabin.

Exactly like the first did this second person look, his whole general appearance being the same, except that on his coat was a brass letter "B."

"What's the matter with C to-night?" A growled as B came up.

"Don't know. In love, I expect," was the laconic answer.

"Bah! there's no time for love affairs now. Business before pleasure," was the retort.

Then silence followed.

C soon made his appearance from the direction of Big Vista, and joined the other two, then the door of the cabin was opened, and the trio entered, closing the door after them.

A dark place it was, but a lantern was soon produced and lit, which lightened up the gloom.

It was all in one room, in the center of which was a table, with three stools by it. In one corner was a coffin-shaped box, set upon two wooden horses, and the box covered over with a large somber blanket.

Just across the room in another corner stood a fleshless, grinning skeleton.

Upon its breast some person had hung a placard, which read:

"I died of small-pox."

In addition to those uninviting relics, there was a musty disagreeable odor to the place, which added to its somberness.

The Black Trio did not appear to be disturbed by the surroundings, however, for they took seats about the table, and passed around a small bottle of wine, until each had taken a swallow.

"Well, here we are once more," A said, after the bottle was put away. "Let's get down to business."

"Well, go ahead," B replied, drumming on the table. "I've learned nothing."

"Nor I," C declared, "more than we suspect."

"It is queer," A added, impatiently. "The man we want—the man we came to Big Vista to entrap, is in the town, and yet, not in our power."

"Because we're not certain which he is," C declared, spiritedly. "We each have our suspicions and yet we hate to precipitate matters, on account of the other one—"

"See here!" A spoke up sharply—"let us understand each other. C, you are in love with this genuine Sierra Sam—you need not deny it!"

"It depends altogether which Sam you take for the original," C said.

"You know which one I mean," A declared; "so admit the corn."

"I am not ashamed to admit that I never was more impressed with a person," C confessed, with a slight laugh. "And you are in the same predicament, B?"

"I am!" B admitted. "You had better confess a similar weakness yourself, my fair A."

"I do—I never met a man before whom I could not steel my heart against. So we are all infatuated with this one man? Well, well, this will not do at all! We did not come here to Big Vista to become fools. We came here to capture a shark for a reward, and that's what we must do."

"Correct!" assented B. "But that has nothing to do with love matters. We three have got to divide, that's flat, or else give up loving, and stick to our vows of allegiance."

"Who is willing to give in? that's the question," C demanded. "Not I, for one!"

"Nor any of us," A responded. "I think I stand the best chance of winning the day!"

Both C and B laughed sarcastically at this.

"If Sierra Sam were here, perhaps he might be able to decide for himself better than any of us," C suggested, taking a sensible view of the matter.

"At this juncture a faint cough was heard. 'Eavesdroppers!' cried A, and the next instant the trio were upon their feet, with cocked revolvers in their grasp.

A moment later the robe was thrown off the coffin, and Sierra Sam leaped out upon the floor.

The weapons of the Black Trio instantly covered him, and A cried out:

"Halt! You are our prisoner!"

"Is that so?" was Sam's rejoinder. "Judging by what I have just overheard, I couldn't have fallen into more affectionate hands."

"That remains to be seen!" A retorted sternly.

"You have discovered a part of our secret, and, therefore, your mouth must be sealed. Do you know what must be done to accomplish this result?"

"Can't say as I do," Sam replied.

"Well, I'll inform you. Before you ever leave this place alive, you must marry one of us. Here we are—you shall have your choice. Is this satisfactory, B and C?"

Those personages nodded assent!

For once Sam of the Sierras wished the earth would open up and swallow him, or his trio of admirers.

CHAPTER VIII.

A BLIND CHOICE.

Sierra's habitual composure was nothing daunted.

"Well!" he said, with a grim sort of humor, "you seem to have the matter all cut and dried among yourselves?"

"Yes, we at present have the whip-row, and it becomes necessary for us to improve it while we can. If you listen, I will explain."

Sam nodded his willingness, and so Letter A continued:

"Well, to begin with, you behold in us the Sisters Sarony, otherwise the Black Trio, female detectives; formerly there were four of us, but the foul hand of a traitor took one off, leaving but us three, bound together by a terrible tie, to avenge our sister's death, if we have to follow her murderer to the end of the earth, our union to be unbroken until the mission is fulfilled."

"But, just now arises a dilemma. When we fancy we have our man safely caught, another of precisely similar appearance comes forward; there are two men in the field; we do not know which is our enemy owing to their perfect resemblance to each other."

"Then, I suppose I am one of the two," Sam remarked, unconcernedly.

"Yes, you are the one suspected, and according to our oath, it would be our duty to see that you never saw the open air again—certainly not until we were satisfied to a certainty whether you were really our man or not. But, now, either you must die, or become one of us, by marriage, the consummation of which shall seal your lips as regards us, until you or the

other man is discovered to be *our* man. This marriage, of course, is to be a matter of formality only, it being an agreement that your bride shall never be known to you, except as you select her here, unless, after our job is done, it is your wish to take her to your heart, and love her, and care for and protect her."

"Well, then it's settled I've got to hitch on to one of you?"

"Yes."

"Humph! how do you know you are right. Maybe you are loving the other Sierra Sam?"

"We will run our chances on that," A responded. "Our woman's instinct tells us which one you are."

"Well, in case I pick out one of you fair damsels, not knowing who you are—how is the ceremony to be performed?"

"One of us will do it. We either have the authorized power. So make your choice; then you must be sworn in, and married. The night is getting well along."

Sam took out and lit a cigar, and regarded the three Sisters Sarony, closely.

"One of you is French Fan, another is Trumps, my declared pard, and the other Angel, of the post-office!" he said, finally. "Now, can't you tell which is which, so I can choose to my own liking?"

The Black Trio shook their heads, in concert. They stood in line facing him, now, and looked as nearly alike as was possible.

"Well, in that case, I suppose I shall have to go it blind. I don't know one of you from the other, but on the venture, I shall choose C!"

There was a moment's silence; then A advanced to the table, and took a book from a drawer a small Testament.

"Do you swear by your hope of Heaven, Sierra Sam, to keep secret all the knowledge that has come into your possession to-night, and to take, hereby, this girl, Letter C—otherwise Stella Sarony—as your lawfully wedded wife, and to love, cherish, protect and support her?" A asked solemnly.

"I do!" Sam answered, resolved to see the thing through to the end.

A raised the Testament to his lips, and then put out her hand.

"Allow me to congratulate you at the expense of myself and sister B!" she said, with attempted heartiness, but with a slight tremor in her voice. "I assure you that you now have three pards who will stand by you to the end, unless you should prove to be *our* man. Then, love, hope and friendship must be crushed by the avenging triple-clasped hands of the three Sisters Sarony! You are at liberty to go, sir."

"Rather, yourselves," Sam returned, "as I have concluded to make this my head-quarters, for the present."

"Oh! well, such being the case, we will bid you good-evening," A assented, whereupon the strange trio filed out of the cabin.

They departed as they had come; A went first, and as soon as she was out of sight, B followed suit, leaving C last.

She turned, as soon as her sister had started, and placed her small gloved hand in the Californian's.

"Good-night, Mr. Slocum," she said, earnestly, yet in a voice that Sam failed to recognize.

"If you regret the proceedings of to-night, let me reassure you, for, except at your own solicitation, you will never be asked to keep your promise; nor will any of your plans ever be interfered with. All I have to say is—your choice will never hate you."

She turned, then, and followed the other.

"Wonders will never cease," the bewildered detective muttered. "Sam! you're a Benedict, at last, and don't know who your wife is!"

Morning dawned at Big Vista and saw the street once more alive with men, most all of whom were strikers.

Deering's crowd also was abroad, but held closely together in the vicinity of the mouth of the drifts, or entrance into the mines, evidently determined to keep the strikers away from the subterranean chambers which yielded gold to Miss Tabitha Green.

Deering was about town, once more. He had had the hair and beard all shaved off his head and face, what the fire had not burnt off, and carried his arm in a sling; therefore, he presented a slightly better appearance than when he emerged from his chimney adventure.

Sierra Sam arrived in camp, shortly after sunrise, looking as fresh, handsome and composed as was usual with him.

He met Deering in the Find, and dropped into a chair opposite the superintendent's seat at a table.

"Nice morning!" Sam remarked.

"Very!" Deering replied, with sneering emphasis.

"How about the strike—looks like no work, for the present, don't it?" from Sam.

"Thanks to you, yes."

"To me? Pshaw! I did not suggest the strike. You were the cause. I saw Tabitha, and I see she is inclined to consider matters."

"What, at your instigation?"

"Oh no! She don't seem to take much stock in me. The other galoot has got the whip row, I surmise."

Deering grinned, maliciously.

"You'll neither of you succeed in displacing me!" he growled.

He then arose and took his departure, evidently not caring to have any further conference with his audacious antagonist.

Old Stockton came into the saloon, soon after, his furrowed visage looking rather gloomy.

"Et's goin' to be fun, bymeby," he announced, pausing by Sam. "They're talkin' bad, on t'other side, I heer, and propose pitchin' inter us, an' drivin' us out o' town."

"Let 'em pitch. I reckon they'll get their fill of it," Sam replied. "Just tell the boys to be easy, keep their mouths shut and eyes open, and we'll see. I've an idea I shall learn some news, before long."

"You calculate they'll try to run in a gang o' Flumeville loafers, to fill our places?" the veteran asked, with perceptible anxiety.

"Possibly. I am preparing for the reception of such news, and likewise preparing to stop such an invasion, so far as lies in my power."

Stockton departed, but Sam waited to finish his cigar, before appearing on the street.

While thus engaged, French Fan sauntered along, dusting off the tables as she came.

"A very pleasant morning, Mr. Slocum!" she accosted, not looking directly at him.

"Very!" Sam replied, emphasizing the word.

"An auspicious morning for a newly married couple to start on a bridal tour, eh?"

She laughed lightly, and a curious flush came to her cheeks, which he could not interpret.

"Yes, indeed!" she returned. "Are you contemplating such a tour?"

"Well—ahem! hardly," Sam responded. "I believe it is customary for a man to have a partner in such trips, which I have not."

"You are unfortunate," she smiled, and passed on.

"Is that the woman I took?" Sam asked himself, when she was gone. "If so, she's as careful as a fox about betraying herself. Most men would be proud of such a beauty."

After finishing his cigar, he went to the post-office, where the telegraph instrument of the line running from Big Vista to Flumeville was located.

To his surprise, he found Trumps behind the counter, in place of Miss Angel, who was nowhere visible.

"Hello! A new clerk, eh?" the Californian interrogated, surveying her in some surprise.

"You bet! This just suits yer pard!" was the jolly response. "What d'ye want—shake for the cigars?"

"Hardly, Miss Sarony," Sam replied. "I desire to use the telegraph instrument, a few minutes."

"Oh! do you telegraph? Well, it will cost you three bits."

Sam sat down at the table, and soon had communication opened with Flumeville, through Deakin the operator at the other end of the line.

"There's a strike here," Sam telegraphed, "and Sierra Sam is at the head of the strikers. Do you know if any movement is on foot for a gang to come here?"

"One Deering has telegraphed, offering extra wages for a hundred men!" was the reply that was flashed back.

"Then, please post a placard from me, giving the boys warning that if they come here to replace us, they come at the peril of their lives," Sam instantly wired back. "I am Sierra Sam!"

Miss Tabitha Green had a morning caller, that morning, whom Claudie ushered into her cosy little sitting-room. This visitor was none other than the Reverend Obediah Potts, to whom reference was made in another chapter. He looked even moresleek and ministerial, than during his ride to Big Vista, on the night of the stage-coach robbery.

"Ah! excuse me, my dear Miss Green," he said, when he found himself in the maiden

lady's presence. "I presume you do not recognize me?"

"No sir, I do not, though my eyes are not very good, which may make all the difference," Miss Green answered, smoothing out her apron and looking very demure.

"The loss of one's sight is a sad, sad calamity," Obediah observed, wiping his own green goggles, without taking them off. "I know how to sympathize with you, dear Miss Tabitha. And, by the way, it's many long years since we last met, Tabitha, up in the green-crowned pasture scenes of old Vermont."

"Do tell!" Miss Green gasped, all in a flutter. "You don't mean to tell me you came from Vermont, sir?"

"Verily I didst, Tabitha—right from Merino Center, which used to be the abiding-place of our early years. Is it possible you do not remember me, Tabitha? Doth thy heart not recall when thy maiden heart once beat against my manly young breast—"

"Obediah Potts! Can it be possible?"

"Ay, all things can be possible, Tabitha," and the new-comer pressed Miss Green's by no means girlish hand with youthful fervor, at the same time hitching his chair closer to hers. "Long years have passed since you and I exchanged vows of constancy, Tabitha, when our obdurate parents refused to sanction our union—but, bless my heart, Tabitha, I feel just as young as I uster did, and I see you look just as chirp and nattering as of yore!"

"Laws sakes, Obediah! you nearly take my breath away!" Miss Green simpered, blushing red to the roots of her hair. "I was just telling a young lady friend all about my early beau, not long ago, but, dear me, I never expected to have you pop in on me, in this way."

"Well, I'll tell you, Tabitha, I couldn't stay away. Ye see, I'm joggin' along in years, an' hev laid up a snug sum from my ministerial labors, and have finally come to the conclusion et was time for me to look around for some staid party of the opposite sex, to help me down through the declining walk of life. By accident, learning of your whereabouts, my bosom heaved with youthful emotion once more, and says I—If Tabitha Green is alive and single, bless my soul, I'm going to set my cap for her once more."

"Laws, Obediah, you should remember we are getting old—"

"Fudge, Tabitha! Sixty years has passed lightly over both our heads, and we're liable to celebrate our fourth-score anniversary. Besides, I hear that some rascals are figuring after your property. Wouldn't it be quite proper for us old lovers to marry, and thus baffle the schemers?"

"Obediah, I—I—"

"Consent, my dearest Tabitha!"

"My sweetest Obediah, you know I cannot say no!"

Curtain!

CHAPTER IX.

ANGEL AND SAM.

AFTER Sierra Sam had sent his warning to the miners of Flumeville, he turned to Trumps, and gazed at her a moment, studiously, for he knew she had been watching him, slyly, when his back was turned.

"Where is Miss Angel?" Sam asked, buying a fresh cigar.

"Oh! only off duty for a few hours," Trumps replied. "Did you want to see her particularly?"

"No, not at all, for that matter. I saw she was not here, and thought it a little odd."

"Maybe. She'll be back before a great while, however."

Sam left the post-office, wondering not a little what had become of the pretty post-mistress. For, although Trumps was pretty, she was not comparable to Angel; nor was the proprietress of the *Find*, although there was an irresistible something about her appearance that attracted the admiration of all who saw her.

The day passed without any particular incident; the strikers collected in groups, here and there, in earnest and excited consultation, while the other party of miners guarded the entrance to the mines, with unceasing vigilance, ready to repulse any attack.

About nine o'clock in the evening Sierra Sam was standing in the doorway of French Fan's *Find*, looking down the moonlit street, where he saw Sierra Sam No. 2 coming toward the saloon.

When he was but a few yards away, Miss Angel came along from an opposite direction,

her eyes downcast, and paying attention to no one.

To reach her shanty store she had to pass Sierra Sam No. 2, but seemed to think nothing wrong, although she barely glanced at him.

The rival Sam'l, however, appeared to be of a festive nature, and desirous of making himself conspicuous, for he stepped before Miss Angel, thereby blockading her passage.

"Hello! pretty!" he exclaimed. "I'm blamed if you ain't the purtiest gal I've seen in a good while, as sure as my name is Slocum. Give me a kiss."

And he immediately seized hold of her.

"Help! help!" Angel screamed, her words ringing out thrillingly through the night.

Quick as he comprehended the situation, Sierra Sam No. 1 sprung from the doorway of the *Find*, and rushed to the rescue.

A crowd of miners followed at his heels, ready to see the fun, if any there was to be.

By the time the rescuers reached the spot the handsome ruffian had released Angel, or, rather, she had struggled from his grasp.

Sierra Sam surveyed the man sternly, and Miss Green's choice returned the stare in grim defiance.

"Miss Angel, did this individual attempt to kiss you against your will?" Sam demanded, his eyes flashing.

"He did, sir—but failed!" Angel replied indignantly.

"You may go, if you please," Sam said, with a bow. "I'll attend to this fellow's case myself."

Angel hurried away, evidently glad to escape, and Sam turned to his double.

"So, that's the sort of a character you are, is it?" he demanded, eying the other sternly. "You insult unprotected ladies, do you, and yet claim to be Sierra Sam?"

"If it suits you that way, yes," No. 2 replied, apparently nothing daunted. "Pray, what business is it to you?"

"The business of a detective and a gentleman to watch out for ruffians of your stamp," was Sam's cutting rejoinder. "Your ill-breeding alone is sufficient evidence of who and what you are."

"I am the genuine Sierra Sam, all the same, and you can't prove it otherwise!" was the sneering retort.

"That remains to be seen," Sam replied. "For the present we have an entirely different matter on hand. You have insulted one of the most estimable young ladies in Big Vista, and you've either got to apologize or settle with me. So take your choice."

"I never was known to apologize yet—I doubt if I shall commence at this late stage. If you mean I must fight with you, I also decline, as I am a gentleman, and never fight with any one."

"You are a cowardly cur, evidently," Sam retorted, in disgust. "Were it not for soiling my hands on you, I'd mop the street with you."

"I am glad you are so fearful," the man replied, sneeringly, but edging away, and finally walking off.

Sam turned away followed by the crowd.

"If that man is a fair specimen of the real Sierra Sam, I am ashamed that I am also a claimant of the title!" he declared to those around him.

Two days passed without any marked incident. The strikers lounged about the town with evidently no intention of coming to any terms, except their own; on the other side the miners of Deering's movement guarded the entrance to the mines with persistent determination.

Sierra Sam No. 1 kept around town, making such observations as he could.

Sierra Sam No. 2 was little seen abroad, spending most of his time at Miss Green's or at Junius Brutus Dunk's shanty.

Angel was little seen at the post-office, generally not making her appearance till late in the evening—her place during the day being filled by Trumps.

This retirement of the beautiful girl struck Sam as peculiar, and caused him to wonder not a little as to where she could absent herself during the daytime, and for what purpose.

But, though he watched and wondered, he failed to arrive at the correct solution.

On the evening of the second day succeeding his encounter with Sam No. 2, he called in at the post-office, about an hour after the mail had arrived.

The room was deserted, except by Angel, who stood behind the counter reading a paper.

"Good-evening!" she said, with her habitual

winning smile. "No mail for you, Mr. Slocum."

"It isn't my luck to receive much," Sam responded. "Guess I've no friends to write to me."

"Oh! I am sure you could win friendship anywhere, Mr. Slocum."

"Ah! then, have I won yours?"

"Have you not? I believe you overheard some such an insinuation, once upon a time," and she busied herself in rearranging her cigar boxes, to hide the flush upon her cheek.

"Well, yes. But, I was at a disadvantage then. I didn't know which was which."

"Nor are you liable to."

"Then you won't tell me?"

"Most assuredly not."

"I have half a notion to leave this town behind me, on that account."

"Why? You made your choice!"

"So I did, but perhaps the wrong one."

"Ha! ha! Well, you must trust to luck for that."

"Trust be hanged! You, and you alone could I ever accept!"

He spoke with great earnestness; his eyes eloquently echoed the sentiment his lips had spoken as they dwelt upon her sunny face.

She colored rather strangely; an expression incomprehensible, swept over her face, leaving it a shade whiter than before.

"Have a cigar?" she said, handing him a box, by way of turning the subject. "You must excuse me, Mr. Slocum, if I command you to say nothing of the kind again. You will remember you are wronging one of these Sisters Sarony, and they are bound by a vow of constancy. I know you will be kind enough to oblige all of us, in this matter."

"Having expressed my sentiments, I will oblige you," Sam responded. "By the way, did a curious coin once come into your possession? If you will lend it to me, a few days, I will return it to you."

She took the eagle she had received from Snodgrass, from the money-drawer, and gave it to him with a smile.

"I was going to return it to you, when I was sure who played up Snodgrass," she said.

Sam gave her another eagle in exchange.

"You are absent much, of late?" he said, interrogatively. "When will I see you again?"

"It will be better if you do not see me, at all, perhaps, more than as a nodding acquaintance," she answered, quite soberly.

"I think I comprehend," Sam said, "but I will answer that I don't quite believe it."

He then lifted his hat, and took his departure.

Outside the post-office he met old Stockton, who had evidently been waiting for him.

"If you win her, she's worth her weight in gold!" the veteran remarked, with a significant chuckle. "I tell ye, it's hard ter select a better 'un than Angel. But, that ain't nuther heer, ner thar. Deering's down at the 'Find,' and he wants to see ye, on important business."

"Do you know the nature of it?"

"No."

They soon reached the saloon, and entered.

Deering and a few of the roughs who sided with him, were there, but the majority of the crowd was composed of strikers.

Deering came forward, as Sam and Stockton entered.

"Ah! so ye got through yer courtship, eh?" he sneered, his face most evil and disagreeable in its expression. "I gave you all the chance I deemed necessary."

"You are very obliging," Sam retorted, with sarcasm. "What may your highness want of me?"

"Yes, I opine I kin accommodate you," Deering growled. "The boys an' I have been talking matters up, and we've come to the conclusion that this hyar strike is money out of our pockets, and there ain't no use o' puttin' up with it any longer. So we've jest sent down to Flumville fer another gang o' men, who aire on the way. Therefore, as there is no further use fer you an' yer strikers, ye've got to clear out o' Big Vista, and make room for the new gang."

"We have, have we? How are you going to accomplish our evacuation, may I ask?" Sam returned.

"You'll find out. I give ye jest till sunrise to-morrow to get your men out of Big Vista. If you don't go, we'll force ye to at the point of the revolver and rifle."

"Then you'd better commence forcing at once!" Sam announced, "for I assure you, in behalf of the honest disposed miners of Big Vista, that we haven't the least idea of quitting the camp, and are prepared to make it red-hot for any one who tries to force us to leave!"

"You'll find out where you'll get left, then!" Deering assured.

"Rather you!" Sam retorted. "We are not in the least afraid of you, and to illustrate, I'll give you just five minutes for you and your handsome confederates to get out of this place. Take my word for it—if you don't improve the opportunity, you will never get another, my noble cousin."

A tremendous hurrah followed from the strikers, and revolvers were drawn on every hand.

Deering saw nothing but grim earnestness manifested, and that a row just then would result disastrously for his interests; so, motioning to his men, he withdrew, followed by them.

By Sam's orders Stockton at once assembled his men within the saloon.

"If they strike before morning, we are better off here than though we were scattered," he explained.

"Have you any objections to my making your place a temporary fort?" he asked of French Fan.

"None at all," she replied, with one of her thrilling glances. "If I had, I fancy I could not withstand your plea!"

Did she mean it?

Or, was it only coquetry?

CHAPTER X.

ATTACK AND DEFEAT.

It was well that the strikers of Big Vista had taken refuge in French Fan's "Find," for otherwise there might have been a worse result of that night's affray.

It was about midnight before any demonstration was made on the part of Deering and his gang; then old Stockton, who had been doing sentinel duty outside, hurriedly entered the saloon, barring the door after him.

"Get ready, boyees!" he cried. "Every man ter strike fer his rights now, regardless of feelin'. Ther durned skunks aire creepin' up on us!"

"To arms, then!" Sierra Sam caused to be passed along among the rough audience. "If you let yourselves be driven out of Big Vista, all right; I never will if I can help it!"

"That's the stuff," the men cried, in a chorus, "and we'll stand by ther old camp as long as she holds together!"

Ordering all lights put out, Sam took his position at a loop-hole just over the door, where he could see without being seen.

Outside the late moon lit up the scene only indistinctly, giving things rather a spectral aspect.

From his position Sam could see that the main body of miners were grouped together down the street, just out of sure rifle range.

What were they waiting for?

It became quite evident to Sam, when he saw several men crawling toward the 'Find' from equally as many directions, each armed with a bundle of kindling-wood.

It was their idea to fire the saloon, and force its occupants to come from cover, when the reserve force would take advantage of the confusion to inaugurate a successful attack.

"I'll check that little game," Sam decided, taking aim at the nearest fire-bug.

"Just you go tell Deering to sail in boldly, if he wants to fight."

Bang!

The bullet from the Californian's rifle grazed the cheek of the man, and clipped off a part of his ear, causing him to leap to his feet with a yell of pain and rage, and scamper back to a place of safety.

The others, who had been creeping up, at once followed suit.

"Ready, now, at the loops!" Sam cried; "here they come, all in a body! Let 'em fire first, and then give 'em fits!"

A rush of feet was heard coming down the street; then a small-sized pandemonium of yells and screeches and oaths, followed by a volley of rifle-shots, many of which burst spitefully through the thin board siding into the saloon, but fortunately not harming any one.

With a will did the strikers return the fire, cutting into the ranks of the enemy so badly that they halted, falteringly.

"Out at 'em!" Sierra Sam shouted, leaping from his perch, and flinging wide open the door. "Now's our chance to show 'em they've tackled the wrong end of the hornet!"

The strikers needed no urging, for they put explicit reliance in the Californian's judgment, well-knowing that he would not lead them wrong.

Out into the moonlit night they poured from the saloon, with fierce yells, and rushed toward

the enemy, firing as they went—Sierra Sam at their head.

Deering, seeing that his men would weaken before the determined strikers—to save his own skin, turned and ran, for life.

It was all his crowd wanted—they broke, in wild confusion, and also fled, precipitately, leaving Sierra Sam and his men masters of the situation.

"Hurrah! Let's take the mines, while we are about it!" old Stockton cried, excitedly.

"No, no!" Sam protested. "Let the mines alone. If Miss Green does not see fit to re-establish you, don't touch a thing of hers. Just take your time now, and I'll guarantee all will come out well. If any of you get in actual need of funds, call on Sam'l, and you shall have 'em—only mind that you have nothing to do with the mines, further than to keep them from being worked by the other men."

An enthusiastic cheer greeted this speech, for it struck the majority of the men as being right, and those who did not quite believe so, were willing to succumb to the ruling opinion.

There had been five killed and a dozen wounded, by the strikers' charge, and these were raised and cared for, the same as though they had been of the strikers' own party.

No further attack was made during the night, and when day dawned once more, quiet prevailed in camp, though Deering and his men were discovered housed in the breaker.

About noon they ran up a white flag on a pole, which went to say that no further demonstration on their part would take place, for the present; so Sam ordered a similar signal shown, but at the same time warning his men to be on the look-out against treachery, as it was not safe to put implicit trust in the enemy.

During the remainder of the day Big Vista once more assumed something of its old appearance, the men of both sides commingling upon the street, with no particular hard feeling, apparently, toward each other.

But that a bitterness was there could not be doubted, and Deering felt it the keenest of all, as he sat in the superintendent's office, and bitterly cursed the ill-luck that had turned his own assault back on him.

Dunk entered the office during the afternoon, just as Deering was delivering himself of a volley of oaths.

"Hello! what's the matter? Aire you down-hearted?" the skinny man asked, dropping into a chair.

"Curses be on you, yes!" the superintendent growled, savagely. "Things aire in a purty shape, when I can't run my own town, ain't they?"

Junius Brutus laughed rather mockingly.

"I am sure no one is to blame but yourself," he said. "You'd never make half a villain without me to help you along. By the way, have you heard the news?"

"What?"

"Old Tabitha has got a lover."

"Bah! you mean the old fossil of a preacher who calls himself Obediah Potts?"

"Yes."

"Humph! the old galoot is a lunatic."

"Nevertheless, Tabitha and he claim to have been lovers once upon a time, and having met again, they're going to hitch-up in double harness, and there'll be a new manager for the Big Vista mines."

Whereat Deering swore roundly.

"Where did you get your information?" he growled, eying the skinny man, sourly.

"From my confidential reporter, Claudie."

"Bah! I don't take stock in it! They're both ready to put on a shroud, instead of wedding-robes."

"Don't fool yourself. They're going to be married, and that, too, before many days. Now, Deering, ef you don't look out, you're goin' ter lose yer trump in this game, just as simple as A, B, C."

"No, I'll be hanged if I will!" Deering gritted. "Why, curse me if I don't murder every one of you, before I'll lose!"

"You may not have to do any such bloody work if you come to terms with me. I tell you, Deering, you can't do better than to come down, and I'll make you heir of Miss Tabitha Green, and owner of the mines."

"And if I don't, what then?" Deering sneered.

CHAPTER XI.

MURDER.

Dunk smiled vaguely at the query.

"Why, then," he said, "I shall see that you never inherit one farthing of Tab's surplus cash. I'll work against you with all my power,

and, no doubt, sufficient charges can be brought up against you to make this part of the country exceedingly unhealthy for you."

"Oh, you refer to the road, do you? Maybe you forget you are implicated as well as I?"

"That cannot be proven. But there is no use of our being at swords' points. You can just as well come to terms with me, and I'll put you onto every point whereby you can score a success. You see what a gripe the other Sierra Sam has got over the best part of the miners, and you probably know that he is the style of a chap who is able to look out for Number One. It behooves you, therefore, to see that he is dethroned."

"Well, curse it, what do you want, to straighten matters up for me?"

"Five thousand dollars down, and five more when you are established beyond dispute as sole heir of Tabitha Green. I am sure nothing can be fairer, as the inheritance is worth many and many times that amount."

"But what disposal will you make of the Sierra Sam you handle, I beg to ask, should I come to terms as you express it?"

"Well, when I see the first V-thousand forthcoming I can readily enlighten you as to how, by the simple turning over of my hand, virtually, I can put everything to rights."

Deering sat gazing at the floor, his face dark and moody.

Finally he arose, went to the safe, and brought back a roll of greenbacks, which he placed in Dunk's hands.

"There!" he growled; "go ahead now, and see that you make good your promises. If you don't, I need not tell you what you will get."

Dunk smiled blandly, as he stored the wealth away in a capacious pocket, well satisfied at the bargain he had driven.

"Well, you need have no fear," he said. "I'll clearly explain, so you can understand. In the first place, although you may have suspicioned to the contrary, my Sierra Sam is the *real* Sierra Sam, and the other fellow is an impostor, but sharper than lightning, which I cannot say of my man. At any rate, the other fellow is sure to win, if left on the market, and the remainder of the men will go over to his side, and we'll get drummed out of town. Emphatically, he must be removed."

De Wolf Deering nodded his assent. This decision harmonized well with his own views.

"Yes, he must be removed; but my man must be put in his place—see? In this way, no difference will be suspected, and my man will at my orders arrange everything so the capture of the strikers can be effected."

"Good plan! But will he do this?"

"He will do anything I suggest. He is under me as much as though he were a child, and with him my word is law."

"Well?"

"Well, after the strikers are captured and given the choice of allegiance or death, and that matter is settled, something else will be done. I am informed that Tabitha Green is to have her will made soon, and as a matter of course she will have me draw it up, and I can easily fix it so that every cent will revert to you, although the real legatee will undoubtedly be his nibs, the Reverend Obediah Potts. When by chance Tabitha drops away, all will come to you; my Sierra Sam will come up missing, and all will be as serene and lovely as a sunflower in June. Then you will have cause to thank the great Junius Brutus Dunk for his efforts in making you a nabob from a pauper."

"Curse your impudence! I'll have you know that I am no pauper!" Deering fired back. "I'm not so badly fooled."

"Well, that is your own business, not mine. Now it remains for you to look tenderly after your beloved aunt's health, and if after a proper course of medicines you fail to see any improvement, but, on the contrary, see that she is rapidly declining, you must not take the thing too badly at heart, but be prepared for her dropping off at any time."

"I shall profit by your advice," Deering said, wiping an imaginary tear from his eyes. "By the way, how are you going to dispose of Sierra Sam?"

"Leave that to my ingenuity. I can decoy and capture him, I reckon, without much trouble."

Sierra Sam sat in French Fan's saloon that night, busied in making notes in his memorandum-book, when that perennial bummer, Snodgrass, entered the place, and after looking over the occupants of the room for awhile, finally deposited his anatomy in a chair, across the table from the Californian.

"Waal, how d'ye do?" Snodgrass began, taking a huge chew of the weed. "Tew bizzy tew receive a communication, Cap?"

"Oh, no," Sam replied, putting up his book. "If you have anything to unburden yourself of, friend Snodgrass, proceed to business."

"Waal, I allow et ain't much. I war jest comin' past the post-offis, an' tho't I'd ax fer mail fer ye, as I allowed ye war hyar. An' so ther new gal wot tends ter ther offis guv me this;" and the Snorter drew forth from his jacket pocket a crumpled-up letter.

Sam received it, and perceived that it was directed to himself in a feminine hand.

With some curiosity he tore off the envelope, and glanced over the inclosed missive.

It ran as follows:

"SIERRA SAM:—

"DEAR SIR—Be constantly on your guard, but fear not! All will yet be well; that is, if my efforts are successful. Keep quiet, and be sure and remember that you are expected to remain faithful to your true 'pard,' of your own choice, in preference to all former 'pards.'"

That was all. There was no signature; the writing was neat and pretty.

"Where did you get this, Snodgrass?" Sam demanded, eying the bullwhacker shrewdly.

"At the post-offis," Snodgrass answered, with an unblushing effort at earnestness. "At the offis, Sammy."

"Sure? Trumps gave it to you?"

"Sartin sure, boss."

"Well, what's your charges for mail service?"

"Waal, Sammy, et ain't my natur' to be mean about small matters—so ef ye could make et four bits, durned ef I won't be yer uncle as long as ther scythe of old Time endures contact wi' ther blades o' eternal grass."

To rid himself of the bummer, Sam tossed him the desired amount and then took leave.

Several days elapsed.

The situation in Big Vista remained about the same, neither the strikers nor the anti-strikers doing any work in the mines.

The wedding of Miss Tabitha Green and Obediah Potts had been postponed a few days, but finally the day for the event arrived.

The nuptials were to be celebrated in the Green mansion, and only a selected few had been invited to be present; yet when the hour for the ceremony arrived, the house was filled, many being present who had received no invitation at all—among them Sierra Sam, the strikers' champion and leader.

About two o'clock in the afternoon, Junius Brutus Dunk entered the parlor, and thence was shown into Miss Green's private sitting-room.

He had a bundle of legal-looking papers in his hand, and the rough audience at once surmised that Miss Green was going to make some provisions for the future, in the way of a will, before she married.

About three o'clock the bridal party entered the room, headed by the minister, and took their places.

The minister then read the marriage service, and pronounced Obediah Potts and Tabitha Green man and wife.

Scarcely had the benediction been pronounced, when there was a sharp, detonating pistol-shot heard; Mrs. Potts gave a quick gasp, and would have fallen had not the minister from Vermont quickly caught her in his arms, and supported her to a couch.

The only medicine-man in Big Vista was Jerome Stansill, and he was immediately sent for. He was a half-breed, but nevertheless had a fair education in doctoring.

But, when he arrived at the bedside of Mrs. Potts, he at once pronounced her past the power of human aid.

A short time later, she was raised and carried into another room.

The excitement was intense.

The news of the tragedy at once spread throughout the town, and soon a large crowd was collected without the shanty and within.

Upon every lip was the question—who shot Tabitha Green?

Nobody seemed to know among those who had been present to witness the ceremony.

Sierra Sam had heard a crash in a pane of glass—saw Miss Green stagger as from receipt of a shot—sprung forward to her side, just as Obediah Potts caught her in his arms—just as Obediah Potts said to him, in a low and not unfamiliar tone:

"Sh! I know the man! Offer a reward, but do nothing rash until you are further advised."

Then, with the assistance of a miner, he carried the wounded woman from the room, as soon as the doctor had given her a quick examination.

Sierra Sam then turned to the crowd, which surged clamorous throughout the room.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, in his tones, ever clear and decisive, "I pray you to be quiet and to use discretion. A terrible crime has been committed here, in our midst, and if you know who is guilty, you are far wiser than I. We came here to witness a ceremony of happiness—instead, it proves to be one of sorrow. But in this hour, gentlemen, it becomes us as men, to look up the man who did the terrible deed. I speak not to party or faction—I speak to you all!"

The speech was received with manifest approval on every hand. It was a noticeable fact that the large share of the men present were not strikers, but it was equally evident that the murder was something horrifying to them, and they were hard against the man who could wantonly commit such a crime at the very bridal altar.

Inquiries were at once circulated on every hand, but no clew seemed forthcoming except what Sam had received from Obediah Potts—and that he was careful enough to keep secret until he was in receipt of something positive on which to base his action.

As soon as he could, Sierra Sam cleared the parlor of every person except himself, Stockton, Snodgrass, and Obediah Potts, and, of course, excepting the darky servant, Claudie.

Leaving Stockton and Snodgrass to see that no intruders gained entrance, Sam then entered the room where Miss Green, the doctor, and Obediah Potts were.

Miss Green was not insensible—she lay, looking around her with a searching glance, as if expecting some one.

The doctor sat near at hand, looking really sober, for a man of his evident habits.

Obediah Potts sat not far away, his head bowed in his hands, and he was weeping.

Sierra Sam looked at him a second time before turning to the dying woman, for it struck him that, to say the least, there was something peculiar in his manner of weeping.

He then turned to Miss Green.

She was white; there was an expression of pain upon her face—their glances met, almost instantly.

"You are not Sammy?" she said, more interrogatively than otherwise.

"I am Samuel Slocum, aunt, but not the impostor you are fostering," Sam replied. "You have met with a bad misfortune, but we hope to bring your assassin to light without much difficulty. As your nephew, I feel it incumbent on me to do all for you that lies in my power, so if you have any word to leave—any requests to make, intrust them in my care, and it shall be my most earnest and welcome duty to execute your wishes to the letter."

She gazed at him, a new light seeming to dawn over her countenance.

"I feel—ay, I seem to know that you are the real Samuel Slocum," she said, faintly, after a moment's study of his manly countenance. "You are a far different man from the other claimant—I can see it clearly, now—I feel by instinct that you are the real son of my poor dead sister."

She put forth her hand, and Sierra Sam took it in his.

"Dear aunt, I have only to tell you honestly, that you are right. But I do pray that you will not favor me. I have all of this world's goods that I require to keep me through to the end of my journey."

"I came not to Big Vista, aunt, to become your heir: on the contrary, I came to solicit you not to connect me with any legacy you might make, as I do not make a practice of receiving what I do not earn. But on my arrival here, I found that the fellow who looks like me was trying to get in a deal to the fore, and I scheduled it as my duty to prevent him if possible. It is no matter of secret to you, how well I have succeeded."

"I need no further assurance to convince me who you are," Mrs. Potts said, earnestly. "I feel that I am going, and what is to be done, must be done at once. Is Obediah here?"

The Vermonter came forward, tears rolling down his fat cheeks from in under his goggles.

"I am here, Tabitha," he said, taking her hand. "What do you wish, dear?"

"Not much, Obediah. You know our mutual secret, and that I am dying. I think that all is coming out well, after all. I now realize that this is really my nephew, Samuel. He does not wish to become my heir. Will you, when you are through with my wealth, according to the terms of my will, leave all to whom Samuel may dictate?"

"I will," Obediah replied, reverently.
 "Samuel, have you any choice?"
 "I have, if the matter be referred to me," Sam replied. "Do you know a young lady named Angel?"
 "Quite well!" Miss Green replied, an expression of pleasure lighting up her pallid face.
 "Then, if it is your desire that I shall name your heir, I will name the woman of my choice—Angel!" Sam said.
 And Miss Green nodded her approval to Obediah.

CHAPTER XII.

OBEDIAH'S DEPARTURE.

WITHIN an hour after Sierra Sam named his choice of heritage, Tabitha Green sunk peacefully into that sleep from which there is no awakening.

Before she dropped away, she whispered a few words to Obediah, which he listened to with strictest attention, and as far as Sam was able to judge, her communication afforded the smooth-faced, reverend gentleman the greatest degree of satisfaction.

After his services were no longer needed, Sam went forth into the town, only to find that the excitement had not abated to any great extent.

A large crowd was gathered about old Stockton, but they gave a cheer of approval as Sierra Sam came up.

"She's dead, aire she?" several miners interrogated, as the Californian came up.

"Yes, she is dead," Sam replied, "and I suppose you've not found the murderer yet? What residents of the place have not been seen, today?"

"De Wolf Deering, for one—he went down to Flumeville last night!" Stockton answered.

"Angel ain't nowhar ter be found, an' t'other Sierra Sam, nuther," a Chinaman importer remarked, who had once attempted to "mash" the fair postmistress, and signally failed.

"Gentlemen," Sierra Sam said, "I have no doubt but what I can name the man who shot Tabitha Green. De Wolf Deering would not be away from Big Vista on such an occasion, without some very important cause. Come! let's find out if he has been in Flumeville."

Headed by him and Stockton, the crowd tramped over to the post-office, and here Sam sat down at the telegraph instrument, and sent a message to Flumeville, inquiring if De Wolf Deering had been seen there within twenty-four hours.

After a five minutes' wait, the answer flashed back that Deering had not been there.

"See, boys," Sam said—"straws most generally tell which way the wind blows. My amiable cousin has not been in the lower camp—where has he been? Couldn't he have slipped down into the vicinity of my maiden aunt's shanty, in disguise, accomplished his purpose, and slipped away again unobserved?"

"Easy enuff, an' he war none too good to do sech a thing, neither!" Snodgrass, the Snorter declared. "Why ther durned galoot hes been a-tryin' ter sic me onter Serious Sam'l heer, by offerin' me fifty dollars, but this great snortin' starm o' everlastin' fury wouldn't sic wuth a cent."

The Snorter's verdict was indorsed by the strikers, but the remaining part of the population would listen to no charge against their leader.

Nevertheless, Sam had a long talk with his men, and ordered placards posted up about the town, offering five-hundred dollars reward for the capture of De Wolf Deering, dead or alive.

The cards were written out and posted in prominent places, there to be viewed by the crowd at large, but no attempt was made, on the part of the Deering element, to disturb or mutilate the notices thus posted.

Toward evening, Sierra Sam dropped into the "Find," and sought out French Fan, who was seated in a retired corner of the room engaged in reading a novel.

She pushed a chair forward for him, as he approached, with one of her old winning smiles.

"I have just been reading one of the most delightful of love stories," she said laying down her book.

"Then, I may as well remark that you are, under the circumstances, a dangerous person to encounter," Sam said, rather sarcastically. "I am afraid of folks who indulge in reading love stories."

"Which is perfectly proper. I believe in married men avoiding all manner of temptation," she retorted, with a nonchalant nod. "By the way, Miss Green is dead, and you are heir, I suppose?"

"Quite to the contrary. I do not aspire to occupying dead women's shoes. I came to ask you where a certain person is?"

"Angel?"
 "Yes!"

"I do not know. I have been worrying much about her strange periods of absence."

"On whose account—hers, or your own?" Sam asked, scrutinizing her fair face with a searching stare that brought color to her cheeks.

"As a matter of course, on her account," she replied quickly. "I have had fears—"

"That she was not remaining true to the vows of the Sisters Sarony?" Sam interrogated.

"Well, yes, so to speak. But, that is foolish. Angel is as constant as either of us. I can not understand where she goes!"

"Perhaps, while you and Trumps remain idle, she is working up a case against me!" Sam laughed. "Still waters run deep, and so forth."

"It may be that you are our man, after all," Fan answered, a strange, set expression coming upon her countenance. "If you are, you will be wise to take advantage of the respite we are giving you."

"I am not inclined to take advantage of the circumstance," he replied, turning away.

Later that night, on his return to the Green residence, he was hailed by Junius Brutus Dunk, who stood in the doorway of his shanty.

"Hello! Come over; I want to see you," the skinny man cried, in a loud voice.

"But I don't want to see you," Sam returned, striding on. "You're mistaken in the man."

"Not a bit of it!" Dunk shouted after him. "I know you apart. By the way, it's all right; see you later."

When Sam arrived at the Green residence he found the parlor occupied by Obediah Potts, and a stranger, who was very busy at writing.

"I am glad you have come," the Vermonter said, "for I am making necessary arrangements for my departure from this place. Mr. Slocum, Mr. Dale, a lawyer, whom I have engaged to make my last will and testament."

The two men acknowledged the introduction—then Dale said:

"Mr. Potts, I have made out your will, I think, according to your directions. If you will listen I will read it to you."

Obediah nodded assent, and the will was read, the devise making "the young woman of Big Vista, known as Angel, sole heir to all-in-all" belonging to Obediah Potts, whether real or "personal property, bonds, moneys, or claims" by heritage.

"It is all right," the Vermonter said, when he heard it read. "Please call in some disinterested parties as witnesses, and then I shall be ready to leave."

"What! you are not going away, Mr. Potts?" Sierra Sam asked, in surprise.

"Ay, I am going to bid farewell to this part of the country—perhaps to all the world," was the sad answer. "I have now nothing to keep me longer here, and prefer to go where I can hide my grief within myself. Will you see that poor Tabitha is properly buried?"

"I will, sir. But I hate to see you leave us, for citizens of your stamp are by no means a drug on the market here in Big Vista."

"Maybe not, sir; but I assure you that nothing can tempt me to remain here. By the way, sir, here is a letter you will oblige me by delivering to Angel, after I have taken my departure."

Sam received a sealed envelope, and soon after watched Obediah Potts mount a newly-purchased burro, just outside the shanty, and ride away.

"A singular personage, whom, thus far, I have not been able to make out," was Sam's verdict, as Obediah disappeared from view.

"By the way, I'll have an excuse for dropping in at the post-office now."

He did drop in, awhile later, just as Trumps was about to shut up shop.

"Good-evening, pard!" she accosted, in her jolly way. "Are you going to buy something? Do, for pity's sake, because I've not taken in a dollar to-night, and the boss will think when she gets back, that I've been knocking down on the receipts."

"Yes. I'll buy a bunch of cigars, if you'll give me a receipt for the pay for them," Sam said, laughing—but in reality he meant what he said, because he wanted to get a specimen of her chirography to compare with the note he had received through Snodgrass.

"It's a bargain!" Trumps assented, seizing a pencil and sheet of paper and rapidly writing out the receipt. "There you are: Received of

Sierra Sam, ten bits for five cigars. Signed—Trumps, for Angel."

Sam received the paper, with an amused smile.

"That will answer, I guess," he said, at the same time noting that the writing was in no way similar to that he mentally compared it with. "Here's your pay. By the way, where is the fair postmistress, that she appeareth so seldom?"

"Give it up," Trumps replied. "What matters it to you, anyhow? Married men should be careful not to be too inquisitive about other ladies."

"Pr'aps!" Sam said dryly.

Just then some one hurriedly passed the door of the post-office, at the same time flinging in a letter.

Sam stooped and picked it up, somewhat anxious to know to whom it was addressed.

"Why, it is for me!" he said, tearing it open. There were but a few lines of the contents, which ran as follows:

"MR. SLOCUM:—I am in trouble. Will you lend me a helping hand?—help me to solve a mystery? Come to the small-pox cabin. Yours ever, ANGEL."

CHAPTER XIII.

TRAPPED.

SIERRA SAM'S pulse beat faster, as he read the note.

"Bad news?" Trumps queried, observing the slight flush that came over his face.

"Well, rather. Guess it can be fixed up all right," he replied, bowing himself out of the place, and hurrying up the street.

With his mind busied with thoughts of the young postmistress and what could possibly be the nature of her trouble, Sam had no suspicion of treachery.

The letter was written in a fine, graceful style of chirography, which could not well have been imitated by a man, unless he was an adept at imitation.

Arrived at the old cabin, Sam opened the door, and stepped within, expecting to see Angel in waiting for him.

But in this, he was mistaken.

Hardly had he stepped his foot upon the rocky floor within, when he received a blow upon the forehead which knocked him clear out of the cabin.

He was partially stunned, but yet knew enough to realize that he was dragged back into the shanty, and his limbs securely bound with strong leather straps.

He was also aware that some water was dashed into his face, and was finally able to open his eyes with a full sense of consciousness that a man sat astride his body, and was looking steadily down into his face, with a pair of gleaming eyes.

Dark though it was in the room, Sam was not long in distinguishing the thin, sharp features of Junius Brutus Dunk.

"Ah! so you have come to, have you, my friend Sam'l?" the skinny man chuckled, shoving the muzzle of one of his revolvers in under the cool blade's nose. "Your girl gave you rather a warm reception, didn't she?"

"Rather," Sam responded. "I was off my guard, or you'd never have taken me, this easy. What do you want, you rack-a-bones?"

"Just what I've got—*you*," Dunk declared, with a satisfied air. "I invited you over to have a chat, awhile ago, but you were too shy; so I had to bait you."

"Well?"

"I am glad you think it is well. It may prove otherwise, things are so decidedly uncertain. By the way, don't you think it's about time you let up for awhile, and confine yourself to quiet? You've been really too active, since you came to Big Vista, and it seems to me as though you ought to slack up, and give some other people a show for their money."

"So you concluded to put a damper in me, to shut off my action, eh?" Sam queried.

"Exactly, exactly! you have too much action to accord with the way things should go—so it becomes necessary to temporarily remove you from the scene of your schemes, to more sedate and substantial quarters, where you will remain in durance until I see fit to turn you loose."

"I presume, by that, you are in the employ of my amiable cousin, Deering?"

"Not impossible nor improbable. At all events, I have reason to want you out of the way, until I make what money I can—then, I have no further use for you. You will, like a gentleman, permit me to blindfold you, and bind up your vocabulary-trap, in order that you may not utter any dulcet notes, while I transport you hence, to your future abiding place."

Sam did not reply. He was not the man to parley unless he saw a fair chance for making something out of it, and seeing that it was useless to "chin" with a man of Dunk's caliber, he maintained a grim silence, and allowed the human cadaver to bind his mouth over with a strip of blanket, and blindfold his eyes with a similar piece.

Dunk then left the shanty and was absent several minutes, when he returned, accompanied by another man.

Sam was then raised, and carried from the cabin, and bound upon the back of a mule.

A short conversation ensued between Dunk and his companion, after which the latter mounted a second mule and rode off down the trail, leading the first by a strap.

Thus from Big Vista's hopeful young metropolis,

was borne away the only man who was universally feared and respected—even by those who turned against him, even though they were too rough and one-sided to acknowledge the fact.

The following morning was an eventful one, in Big Vista.

When old Stockton arose bright and early, he made a discovery, that, to him was alarming.

The Deering gang was once more guarding the mouth of the mines—not alone among themselves as formerly, but reinforced by at least a hundred men from Flumeville.

As quickly and as quietly as possible, Stockton had his own supporting party aroused, and gathered within French Fan's saloon.

Here a consultation was held, which Stockton had to lead, as Sierra Sam was not present, and could not be readily found.

"Ther durned galoots hev got us now, unless we kin do some big schemin' ter sarcumvent 'em," the veteran declared. "I tell ye I wish Sam'l war here. Anybody seen him?"

No one responded.

"Probably he's skipped out, an' smuggled in the Flumes, ter work ag'in us," one miner suggested.

"No sech a thing!" Stockton denied, stoutly. "Thet man Sam is as square as ther day is long, I tell you!"

"You bet on that!" a voice cried out, and Sierra Sam No. 2 stepped into the room, smilingly.

A cheer went up from the crowd.

They did not recognize the difference between him and the original.

"Stockton, I am glad to hear that you entertain so good an opinion of me," he said, grasping the veteran's hand. "By the way, I have been on a little spying expedition in the enemy's camp, in disguise, and while I do not anticipate any immediate hostile proceeding on their part, it will be well enough to keep our forces under this present shelter. I have no doubt the other gang will go to work in a day or so with Deering at the fore. If any one gains possession of Tabitha Green's mines, then it will be only by a superior force of numbers. I'll speak with mine host Fanny, and see if her larder will support us as regards provender."

Stockton watched him narrowly as he walked over to where Fanny was sitting alone, apparently absorbed in thought.

"Well, I see you've made my place a fort again," she said, looking up with a smile.

"Yes, for a time. They rung in a sly deal upon us, these anti-strikers, by importing some Flumevillians. It strikes me, Fanny, that it is going to be a tough struggle before we get through—this to you only."

"Do you think so?"

She looked at him curiously as she spoke.

If cognizant of the fact he made no notice of it, but continued:

"Yes. I do honestly think so. I had a great deal of courage and confidence at the time of the other attack, for then we were more on terms of equality. But now it is different. They have over three men to our one, I suspect, for they are expecting still another reinforcement from Flumeville. To let this out to the men would be disastrous just now, and so I must cheer them on and give them every encouragement to strengthen their bravery. I trust you will assist me?"

"Do you need to ask, Mr. Slocum?" was the thrilling answer. "I think you know full well that I would do all in my power for you."

"You inspire me, Fanny," the false Sierra Sam said, earnestly. "I think I do comprehend your nature thoroughly, and can read your heart as though it were my own. I know you are passionate and intense in your loves and hates. Fanny, I know more—I know that you love me with all the power of your soul and being!"

She averted her coloring face with a gasp that betrayed her secret.

"I know all!" the schemer went on, speaking in a low passionate tone. "Let it be no secret between us, for your affection is doubly returned, regardless of previous circumstances. To know that you are mine thrills me to the very core, and aids me to add more courage to danger I must confront. Only tell me, Fanny, that though the whole world may pronounce me false, and beat and cheat me at every turn, and that though others and even death may come to claim me, you will remain true to me to the last."

She did not reply, and kept her flushed, joyous face still averted, but put forth her hand in his, as her answer.

"May our reward be happiness!" he said, in a low, fervent tone. "Excuse me now, please. I must look to the wants of the men, and keep them in good heart. Have you a jug of whisky you can sell me? I wish to give them all a ration to put them on nerve."

"I will see," she said arising. "Come with me, mine!" and her loving glance caused even the heart of the impostor to thrill within him.

She led the way behind the bar and thence into a small room opening off from that end of the building.

Here were decanters, jugs and quarter-barrels of various kinds of liquors.

Sierra Sam—as we shall yet call him—selected a gallon jug of Bourbon, and tasted of it to sample its quality.

"That will do," he said. "Now, if you will be kind enough to bring me a quart of water, and an empty flask, I will weaken this, as I do not care to stimulate the men, beyond a certain degree."

Fan went back into the bar-room, for the flask and water.

While she was gone, the villain emptied a pint of the liquor through a knot-hole in the floor, and quickly emptied the contents of a pint-bottle into the demijohn.

"That will settle their hash," he muttered. "All's fair in love or war."

Fan came in a moment later.

"I guess I'll give it to them just as it is, but in small doses," he said, smiling. "You know the more hornet-stings to the inch of bug-juice, the better it suits the average western man."

They then went back into the saloon, which contained all the strikers.

Commencing with old Stockton, the bogus Sierra Sam proceeded to give every man a liberal drink of the powerfully drugged liquor, and ended by pretending to take a hearty drink himself, but the lightning way in which he succeeded in slipping it down within his shirt-bosom, showed that he was at least an expert in the "ways that are dark."

"Now, boys," he said, "business is before us, and I want to distinctly impress upon your memories that business is business. We have a big odds to contend with and if we hope to win, we must be strong, agile and sharp. I will now leave Stockton to get you in fighting trim, while I slip out, and make a few more observations."

The majority of the men grunted forth an assent, but the veteran Stockton, did not appear to feel so deeply impressed with the pseudo-Californian's speech.

"Boys," he said, after Sierra Sam had left the saloon, "I fear thar's a screw loose here, somewhere's. Somehow, I feel all mixed up, and I guess I'll go and sit down awhile and consider."

And he did sit down, but it was not five minutes ere his eyes were closed, and he was in oblivion, so far as his surroundings were concerned.

One by one his followers dropped into chairs, or upon the floor, as the case might be, from the effects of the drug that had been put in the liquor.

With a pallid face and staring, frightened gaze, French Fan leaned against her bar, and watched the startling effect of the liquor, the truth of the pseudo Sierra Sam's falsity, gradually dawning upon her.

"My God—I have been the tool of a demon in nature's disguise, who has taken advantage of my weakness and gained a point in power. That man was not the real Sierra Sam; where is he?"

She might have asked the mountain winds that swept down over Big Vista city, but their reply would have given her no satisfaction.

She sat staring at the wreck about her, wondering what next would follow, and yet not possessed of power to raise a hand toward arousing the drugged men from their stupor.

Once she saw the door of the saloon open, and Angel step within—saw her take a quick, comprehending glance about—saw her dart out again, and close the door.

Then all was quiet again—deathly quiet, it seemed—until the door was burst violently open, and De Wolf Deering, with two-score or more of armed men at his back, burst into the room.

"Hurrah, boys! Victory is mine at last," he yelled, leaping forward toward French Fan.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CHOICE OF LOTS.

THERE was no one to gainsay Deering's cry of victory, except French Fan alone, but she not only knew that her voice would be useless on this occasion, but the less she said the better for her.

"Come along," Deering roared to his men. "We've got everything our own way now, and we must improve the advantage. Bind every man, hand and foot!"

The job was quickly completed, without awakening the drugged sleepers, and they were shouldered and carried off to the vicinity of the mouth of the shafts, where a camp had been established for the Flumeville miners.

French Fan watched the proceeding with a colorless face.

Deering approached her with a triumphant leer upon his sensual face.

"Well, what d'ye think o' matters?" he demanded, with a malicious smile. "Rather tripped up your calculations, didn't it?"

"Not in the least. The plan has worked admirably, as I predicted it would when I consented to furnish the whisky," Fanny replied, with apparent coolness.

"You?" Deering gasped.

"Yes, I! Didn't know that I was a party to the scheme, did you?"

"The devil, no!"

"Thought not. If it hadn't been for me and Trumps and Angel, your little calculation wouldn't have worked at all."

"Oh! I see. You are trying to creep around onto the side offering the most protection," Deering sneered. "Well, ye'd better. Soon's I get matters straightened around ship-shape, one of you three girls have got to marry me."

"Choose me, and I'll scratch your ugly eyes out, first chance I get!" Fanny assured, with a grimace. "I think that I will have the bogus Sierra Sam and leave you out in the cold."

"In which case the fair Angel will do me just as well, and she is much more attractive than you," Deering retorted, as he turned and left the saloon.

When he and the last of his gang were gone, and she was alone, a strange expression came over the face of the girl, as she stood staring into a mirror behind the bar.

"Even he twits me of my sister's superior beauty," she murmured, "knowing that it is an unwelcome fact to me. Angel is more beautiful than I, and

worst of all, Sierra Sam knows it. While I will give up all on earth I hold dear for his sake, he passes me by to bestow his affection upon her. Oh! why is this so?"

She bowed her head in her hands, and wept with intense feeling.

The door opened and Trumps came into the saloon, seeming to be rather surprised to see the other giving away to grief.

French Fan looked up, half-fiercely, as if the intrusion were unwelcome.

"What do you want?" she demanded, sharply, drying her tears.

"I want you to brace up and be yourself," Trumps replied, speaking with more sternness than was usual with her. "What is the matter?"

"Nothing!" Fan flashed back, recovering her composure with an effort. "What do you want?"

Trumps smiled.

"I fancy I comprehend what is the matter with you," she said, knowingly, not answering the question. "You are weaker than I ever supposed. But this won't do. You know what yet remains to be done, and it must be done at once. The time has arrived when we must smother every hope and desire, and strike the blow we came here to strike. Get ready and come to the cabin."

An hour later the three Sisters Sarony sat at the table in small-pox cabin—not in their disguise in black, but as was their usual appearance in Big Vista.

Upon each face there was an expression of resolution, an expression of anxiety, an expression of pain, illy concealed.

"Where is the real Sierra Sam?" Angel asked, opening the meeting. "He is not in Big Vista."

"I do not know," Fan replied. "I supposed it was he who came into the saloon and got the liquor to treat the strikers, but awakened to the cheat, when I saw the effect of the drug."

"Your customary shrewdness must have been love-blinded," Angel said, with a rather cynical laugh. "I fancy, had it been me, I should have detected the cheat by instinct."

"You have unusual confidence in yourself," Fanny retorted. "Have you anything to offer, Trumps?"

"Yes. It is my opinion Sierra Sam has been decoyed and captured," Trumps replied. "Last night just before I closed up he came into the store and asked for Angel. While there some one flung him in a letter, which he opened and read, and then left in a hurry. Before he left he dropped this letter for Angel into the postal-box," and as she finished speaking Trumps flung a letter across the table to where Angel was seated.

"A love-letter, I presume," French Fan remarked, sarcastically.

"On the contrary, it is not from Sierra Sam at all," Angel said, after opening it. "Listen:

"ANGEL, OF BIG VISTA:—

"ESTEEMED LADY—When this missive reaches you all that is earthly of Obediah Potts will have been consigned to the tomb, and all property left behind by me will be yours, according to the provisions of my last will and testament, left in the hands of one lawyer Dale, and you can enter into the immediate possession of your inheritance, with the last and best well-wishes of OBEDIAH POTTS."

French Fan and Trumps uttered exclamations of surprise.

"That means that you are heir to the Big Vista mines," Trumps said, "for I understand Tabitha left everything to the old Vermonter."

"That remains to be seen," Fan remarked. "You remember that the rascal Dunk drew her will, and he is the right-hand man of De Wolf Deering. It would be easy for him to have some flaw in the will, so that Obediah would have no claim through Tabitha's death."

"You are right," Angel asserted. "Dunk is an arrant knave, and will play the game he can see the most money in, you can rest assured. We must look him up, and get possession of the will."

"I believe the terms of our mutual agreement apply only to the accomplishing of one object," Fan suggested, rather coldly, "and personal matters should not be considered by us as a sisterhood."

Angel flushed.

"Perhaps you are right," she returned, calmly. "I perceive that you are so far forgetting your oath as to allow jealousy a corner in your heart. Therefore, I will try not to burden you with any of my troubles."

"Stop! this will not do!" Trumps commanded authoritatively. "Let us remain sisters, at least while our mission is unaccomplished. I think we are all well satisfied which is our man now, are we not?"

Both Angel and Fan assented.

Indeed, after the bogus Sierra Sam's treachery, there could be but little doubt in the matter.

"McNorrin, as he claimed to be before coming here," Trumps went on, "is in reality Frank Fuller, the murderer of our poor dead sister, Adele. This same Frank Fuller is also the man who betrayed the men of Big Vista into the hands of the enemy!"

Angel and Fan nodded their assent.

"Such being the case, it behooves us, before looking up the real Sierra Sam, to secure our man. I believe it was a part of our agreement, that we should all join equally in the search, and when we found the man, we were to draw lots to determine who should strike the blow of vengeance?"

"Exactly," French Fan replied. "It but remains now to see who is elected to that honor. Let Angel prepare the lots—whoever draws the shortest out of three, shall do the last act in the programme."

Angel's face paled, but she did not hesitate. She knew too well the terms of the vow that bound them together.

She arose, procured three matches, and going to the further side of the room broke them off in uneven lengths. She then returned to the table, and held the exposed ends toward her sister.

"There they are," she said, gravely. "Consider what the result of drawing the shortest must be, and make your choice."

Trumps drew first, choosing the match nearest to her.

It proved to be the one that had been broken off near to the center.

"You next," Angel said, looking at French Fan.

The latter reached forth her fair white hand, with its glittering array of diamond-set rings, and drew one of the sticks.

Angel then opened her hand, exposing the length of the other.

Fan had drawn the shortest of the three pieces, and was elected to strike the blow that was to avenge a dead sister's wrongs.

"The meeting is adjourned," Angel said. "The vows that have heretofore bound us together, are hereby dissolved!"

CHAPTER XV.

A FRIEND, UNEXPECTED.

SIERRA SAM was taken to a cave in the mountains, not three miles from Big Vista.

Here his conductor unbound him from the horse, assisted him to dismount, removed the gag from his mouth, and the cloth from before his eyes.

The cave was so dark that at first Sam could hardly distinguish the features of his captor, but when he did, he gave vent to an exclamation of surprise.

"Balbro, as I live!" he cried.

"Ay, Balbro!" his captor replied, "though I am rather ashamed to acknowledge the fact. Sierra Sam, I give you my word of honor, I knew not this was you, when Deering sent me here with you. He told me you were the bogus, instead of the real Sierra Sam, and that he was working solely for your interests."

"Indeed," Sam replied, rather sarcastically. "Why did you come here to Big Vista, Balbro, when I positively warned you men of Flumeville not to come?"

"Simply because I came to help you, Sam, and bring the other party to confusion. With such an aim in view I accepted the charge from the rascal, Deering, of bringing you here."

Sam looked at the man steadily and accusingly, but on account of the gloom, could discern no particular expression upon his face.

"See here, Balbro," he said, in a sternly sober tone, "you remember I did you a service, once."

"Have I ever forgotten it? I came into Flumeville one day, a wreck of a drunken loafer, rough and wretched. You met me and made me better by exacting a promise from me to brace up, and putting money in my hand, when I had none in my pocket. I did brace up, in some respects, and got work through your agency, and though I am counted a pretty rough character, as such run, I have it to say, proudly, that I would not harm a hair of your head for all the wealth Big Vista boasts."

"I believe you, Balbro, so let that subject drop. What do you propose to do next?"

"What do you suppose?" Balbro asked. "A friend in need, is a friend indeed; but a friend by act, is a friend intact."

And drawing his knife, the bumper cut the Californian's bonds.

"Now, then," he said, "back for Big Vista we go. As I told you before, I never forget a kindness, and I propose to further prove it. All the men I had brought from Flumeville are your friends, as well as mine, regardless of wages or other influence. At the present time, very likely, your men, through the agency of Junius Brutus Dunk, are in Deering's power, but it shall not long be so."

"Let's start for Big Vista as soon as possible, then," said Sam.

"Correct! We will start at once, but I must make a detour, in order to reach a hidden disguise. So, if you choose, you can go on ahead to the vicinity of the town, and await my arrival, there, when we will form plans for the discomfiture of the other party."

Having little doubt but what Balbro was true, Sierra Sam agreed to his proposition, and they soon after left the cave, Balbro going toward Flumeville, and Sam shaping his route toward the town once more.

"When I get there now," he muttered, "matters will have to be narrowed down."

CHAPTER XVI.

CONCLUSION.

SIERRA SAM went back to the vicinity of Big Vista, to the place that Balbro had appointed. It was not far from the small-pox cabin, and knowing that he had plenty of time, Sam made his way to the cabin to see if some disguises he had left there had been disturbed.

To his surprise, when he entered the place he found Snodgrass, the Snorter there, seated comfortably with his heels elevated upon the table and in evident enjoyment of a cigar.

"Oh! is that you, Sammy?" he saluted. "Come in and take a seat. I got a little ahead of you by a short cut, and thought I'd take a little rest."

"Got ahead of me?" Sam asked, advancing and taking a seat opposite the Snorter. "Ah! I fancy I get onto the racket!"

"It is not my fault if you don't, Sam'l," the seeming bullwhacker replied, "for I am Balbro, and likewise the Snodgrass you once met in Flumeville, and afterward infringed upon."

"By all that's wonderful, I am surprised at this revelation," Sam declared, seating himself nearer

to the man that he might get a better view of him in the dim light of the lantern.

"I see now that your eyes and the eyes of Balbro are the same. When we left the post-office, once upon a time, and agreed that I should renounce my right to the title of Snodgrass, I had no idea I had ever met you except as Snodgrass, which character you will acknowledge I personated with a fair degree of success."

"Nearly if not quite as good as myself, the original," Balbro replied. "By the way, while you have been improving a roundabout way to reach this place, I have been making some observations, and I have come to the conclusion that we can profit best for awhile by remaining concealed in this place."

And they did remain concealed in the "lean-to" kitchen—remained there until the three Sisters Sarony had visited the place and decided, by drawing lots, who should be the one of the Black Trio to deal the fatal blow to Frank Fuller, the murderer of Adele Sarony!

When the strange trio were gone, Sam and Balbro set out for French Fan's saloon and found it deserted, except of the fair proprietress, who seemed surprised at sight of Sam.

"Why, Mr. Slocum, how glad I am to see you back! Have you been in trouble?"

"Well, no; not particularly," Sam replied. "How does the situation stand this morning?"

"Bad!" Fan replied. "Deering and his gang have possession of the town, through having captured the strikers."

She then went on to explain what is already known to the reader, concerning the drugged liquor, which the bogus Sierra Sam had administered to the unsuspecting strikers.

"We'll soon settle the matter now," Balbro announced. "Come, Slocum, and we'll deal Deering a deal he does not anticipate."

They left the saloon and crossed the plateau toward the mouth of the mines, where the Flumevillians' camp had been pitched, and in whose charge the captured strikers had been placed.

The Flumevillians were all astir, and so were Deering's men.

It was evident that the arrival of Sierra Sam and Balbro, otherwise Snodgrass, had been noted, and caused not a little excitement.

"If I see that it is practicable, I will give the suggestion, and we will surrender," Balbro explained. "My men will play their parts all right, and as soon as advisable, will turn the tables."

When they arrived at the scene of the camp, Deering made his appearance from the ore-breaker, and strode over to where Sam and Balbro had halted.

"See here, what the devil are you two loafers hanging around here for?" he demanded, with an oath. "This town is mine, now, and I'll give you just about five minutes to clear out of it, and never show up here again!"

"Is it possible?" Sam retorted. "Where do you get so much authority?"

"Here!" Deering replied, waving his hand triumphantly toward his men and the Flumeville recruits. "By force of numbers, as you perceive. Your strikers are my prisoners, and are to be tried and sentenced at my convenience. If you do not want to share their fate, get up and git!"

"I am sorry to say that I don't scare worth a cent," Sam retorted, with imperturbable coolness. "De Wolf Deering, I am an officer of the law, and demand your surrender, in the name of the law, for the murder of Tabitha Green, who yet lies unburied in her residence."

As he spoke Sam stepped forward to grasp his villainous cousin, but was not permitted to attain his object.

A dozen of Deering's men leaped in front of him and, though he drew a knife and fought them back fiercely, they soon succeeded in overpowering him, and also secured Snodgrass.

Both were firmly bound to posts in the vicinity.

"O-ho! your authority don't extend very far!" Deering sneered, striding up to Sam and smiting him across the cheek. "By all the furies, you'll find you've been taking sides against the wrong man in this matter, and to-night at sunset, you shall receive your trial the same as the others, and you need not rack your brains to guess what your sentence will be. I am the one who holds the trump, and you shall 'pass!'"

"Maybe not," Sam replied, retaining his composure.

But when sunset came there was no movement toward a trial, and Sam was removed from the post and locked up, helpless, in an empty shanty.

Darkness soon stole over the now grim mountain town, and Sam lay still and watchful in his temporary prison, rather expecting that it would not be long ere Snodgrass and his men would come to his rescue.

The evening was well advanced, when the door was cautiously opened and some one entered the room.

At first Sam could not make out who it was, but as soon as the light of a bull's-eye lantern was turned on, he perceived that it was French Fan.

There was an expression of stern resolve upon her face, as she advanced, and Sam saw, to his astonishment, that her right hand clutched a shining dagger.

"Hello! Out on a carving expedition?" Sam interrogated, more merrily than he really felt.

"I presume you will find out!" Fan responded. "Terry McNorin, Sierra Sam, or Frank Fuller, whichever you choose to call yourself, your time is up. Your lease of life has already been longer than it should be or would have been, but for your strange resemblance to the real Sierra Sam. Do you not

know me, murderer? I am Bijou Sarony, the one of the three Sisters Sarony, elected to avenge our sister's death, by killing you!"

She raised her weapon aloft, and bent forward toward him.

"Stop!" Sam cried, sharply. "I am not McNorin—I am Sam Slocum, the original. Strike me not!"

"You lie! You cannot cheat me now, as you did when you drugged the miners, for my eyes are not to be deceived. As you murdered my sister, so shall you die, and may God have mercy on your soul!"

Her hand flew upward, and the blade flashed through air.

Sam quickly rolled over, and the weapon was partly buried in the rough floor of the shanty.

French Fan uttered a vexed cry, and attempted to jerk forth the weapon, but before she could do so, she was seized from behind, and dragged bodily from the shanty.

"Fool!" Trumps cried in her ear, "that is not your man. There he stands now!"

She pointed over to the open doorway of Dunk's shanty.

From where they stood, they could see the outlines of the pseudo Sierra Sam looming up in the doorway.

"Are you sure?" Fan demanded, trembling all over.

"Positive!" Trumps asserted. "You came near murdering the real Sierra Sam."

Fan darted away, with a strange gasp.

About midnight, the door of Sierra Sam's prison was once more opened, and Snodgrass entered.

"All right!" he said, cutting Sam's bonds. "Deering's men are all captured, and all that remains is to secure him and his man Dunk."

They left the place, and went at once to Deering's shanty, backed by a crowd of Sam's released men and the Flumevillians.

Deering was not up, having turned in for the night; but a few raps brought him to the door, in simply his shirt and pants.

"Hello! what means this racket?" he roared, savagely.

"It means that you have run to the end of your rope!" Sam cried, springing forward, and dextrously handcuffing the ruffian. "This time I make sure of you, my amiable Deering!"

What remains necessary to be told of this story, can be given in a few words.

Following Deering's arrest, Dunk was also seized, and Tabitha Green's will was found upon his person, so altered and erased that it was hardly readable, and gave everything to Deering.

Fearing that his life was in peril, however, the cadaverous scoundrel made a confession, in which he admitted that Obediah Potts was the legatee, and also that De Wolf Deering, himself, and the bogus Sierra Sam had conspired for the murder of poor Tabitha, and that Deering had committed the crime; also that Deering was at the head of the gang of road-agents who frequently robbed the stages, many of whom were men under Deering's employ in the mines.

The confession raised a decided furore of excitement, and for a while mob law threatened to prevail; but through Sam's influence no harm was offered the prisoners, as he promised a trial should be given them in the morning.

A search, however, was made for McNorin, and about daybreak he was found, dead, near the small-pox cabin.

Upon his breast was pinned a paper containing, to Sam, sufficient explanation of how he had met his fate.

This paper read:

"Vengeance is mine. BIJOU SARONY."

Going back to the *Find*, Sam found it closed up, and upon the door there was a paper pinned, which read:

"SIERRA SAM:—You will find a letter for you in the post-office."

Hoping to see Angel, Sam accordingly took his way to the post-office, as soon as it was open, in the morning, and found Angel preparing for the day's business.

"A letter for you," she said, nodding, and handing him a delicate missive.

He opened it, and read:

"DEAR MR. SLOCUM:—The mission of the three Sisters Sarony is fulfilled, and in deference to our Angel, whom you chose, we have left Big Vista, forever, that she may be your pard for life. Marry her, and believe that our blessings will ever be with you both. BIJOU AND GUSSIE SARONY."

Sam handed the letter to Angel, or Stella, and she read it with flushing cheeks and tearful eyes.

"They have left you alone and given you to me," he said; "will you also give yourself to me?"

With her blushing face hidden upon his breast, she gave him her answer, and it was

"With all my heart!"

Poor Tabitha was given a respectable burial, that morning, there being a large turnout.

The trial of Deering was then had, and he was convicted of murder in the first degree, and together with his pals, a few days later, handed over to the care of a deputy-marshal to be taken care of.

Dunk escaped, through his confession, and hurriedly left Big Vista forever.

Later, leaving the mines in charge of Stockton and Snodgrass, Sam and Angel set forth on their bridal-tour, in which the Mountain Ferret succeeded in running into very deep waters.

THE END.

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